THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT COULD

adapted for Readers Theater

by Laura Gibbs — LauraGibbs.net/LittleEngine — Make a Copy [version 1-1-2026]

The Little Engine That Could by Watty Piper with illustrations by Lois Lenski was published in 1930. On January 1 2026 both the text and the illustrations entered the public domain in the United States. This Readers Theater preview and script are published with a ***CC-BY Creative Commons license*** allowing users to distribute, remix, adapt and build on the content in any way (CC) with author attribution (BY).

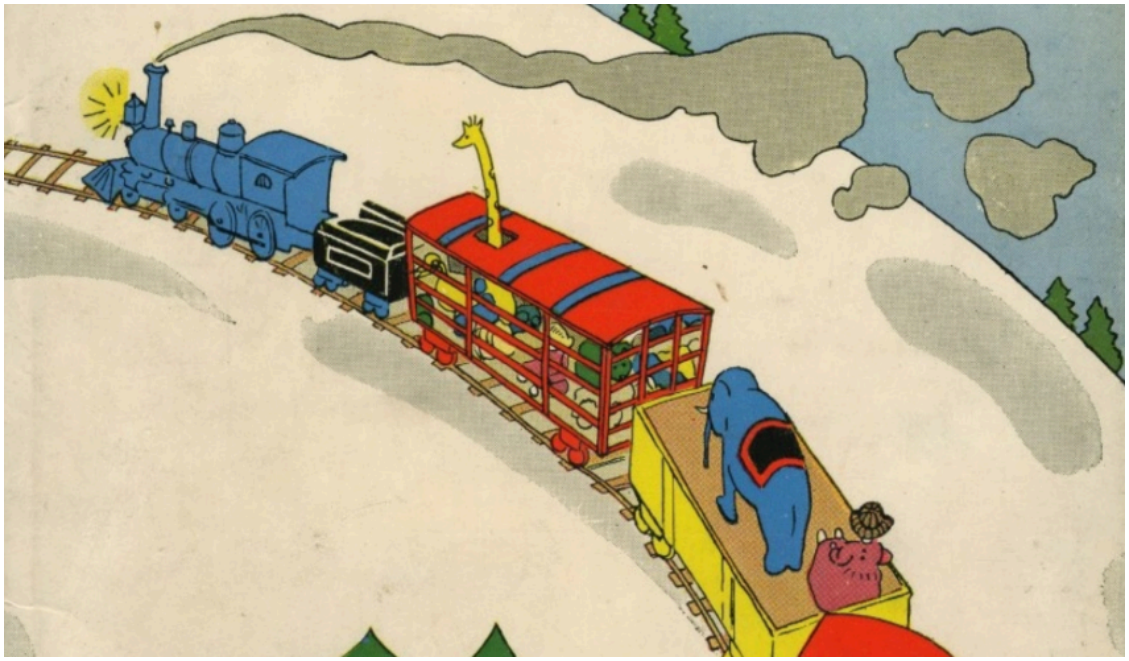
TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Little Engine That Could, Readers Theater preview by Laura Gibbs . . . . page 2

The Little Engine That Could, Readers Theater script by Laura Gibbs . . . . . page 24

Appendix A. ***The Little Engine That Could*** by Watty Piper, illustrated by Lois Lenski

Appendix B. **Open the Language Classroom Curtains to Readers Theater** by Laura Gibbs and Heather Kretschmer in *Mind, Brain and Education Think Tank*, Feb. 2024



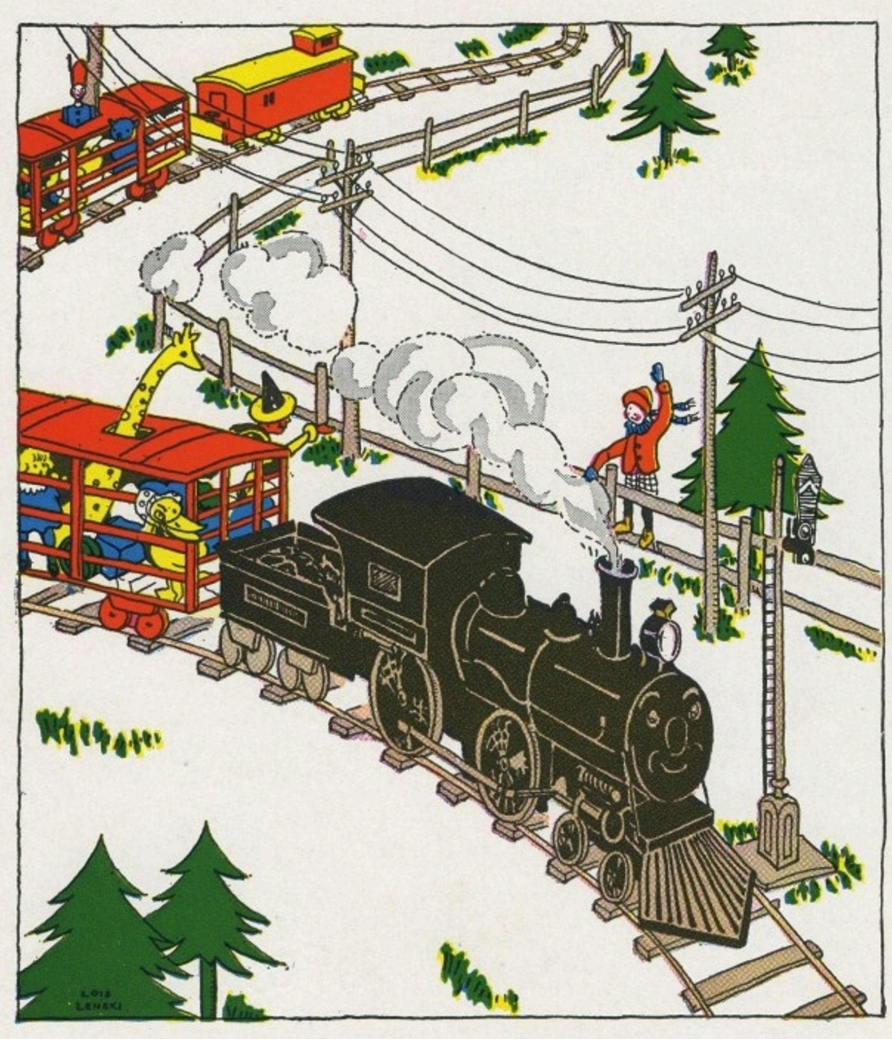
This "preview" of the Readers Theater script can help readers get ready to read:

Chapter 1: The Little Train

Chug-chug, chug-chug, chugga-chugga. Toot! Toot!

Do you hear that? Once upon a time there was a Little Train.

Huff-n-puff, huff-n-puff! Choo-CHOO!



The Little Train was a happy little train because her cars were full of all kinds of good things for children.

Just look: her first car was full of toy animals — there were giraffes with long necks and there were teddy bears who had almost no necks at all! There were toy rabbits and toy monkeys, toy piglets and cows. There was even a toy baby elephant!

And there were not just stuffed animals! In the second car of the Little Train there were dolls — all kinds of dolls, and there was also a little toy clown: he was the funniest little toy clown that you ever saw.

And the third car was also full of toys! There were toy trains and toy planes, spinning tops and bouncing balls, and all kinds of puzzles and games.

And look inside the fourth car: it was full of picture books and coloring books, joke books and riddle books, story books and poetry books — there were all kinds of books!

Last but not least, take a peek inside the fifth car of the Little Train: it was full of wonderful food! There were big golden oranges and big red apples, with bottles of milk for breakfast and baskets of vegetables for dinner, plus cakes and cookies for dessert.

Stuffed animals and dolls and toys, all those books and all that food — the Little Train was carrying all those nice things to the little girls and boys who lived on the other side of the mountain. The Little Train knew the boys and girls would be so happy when she finally arrived!

So the Little Train puffed and chugged...

Chug-chug, chugga-chugga. Toot! Toot! Huff-n-puff, huff-n-puff! Choo-CHOO!

But then all of a sudden the Little Train stopped!

"Oh no!" cried the Little Train. "What's happening? My engine must be broken. My wheels aren't turning, and I can't go another inch."

The Little Clown said, "Keep trying, Little Train!"

"I'm trying! I'm trying!" said the Little Train. "But my wheels won't turn."

The Baby Elephant was worried. "What are the children going to do now? They are waiting for us on the other side of the mountain!"

The Giraffe was worried too. "The children will be so sad without any nice toys to play with and without any nice food to eat."

So the Teddy Bear shouted, "Please keep trying, Little Train!"

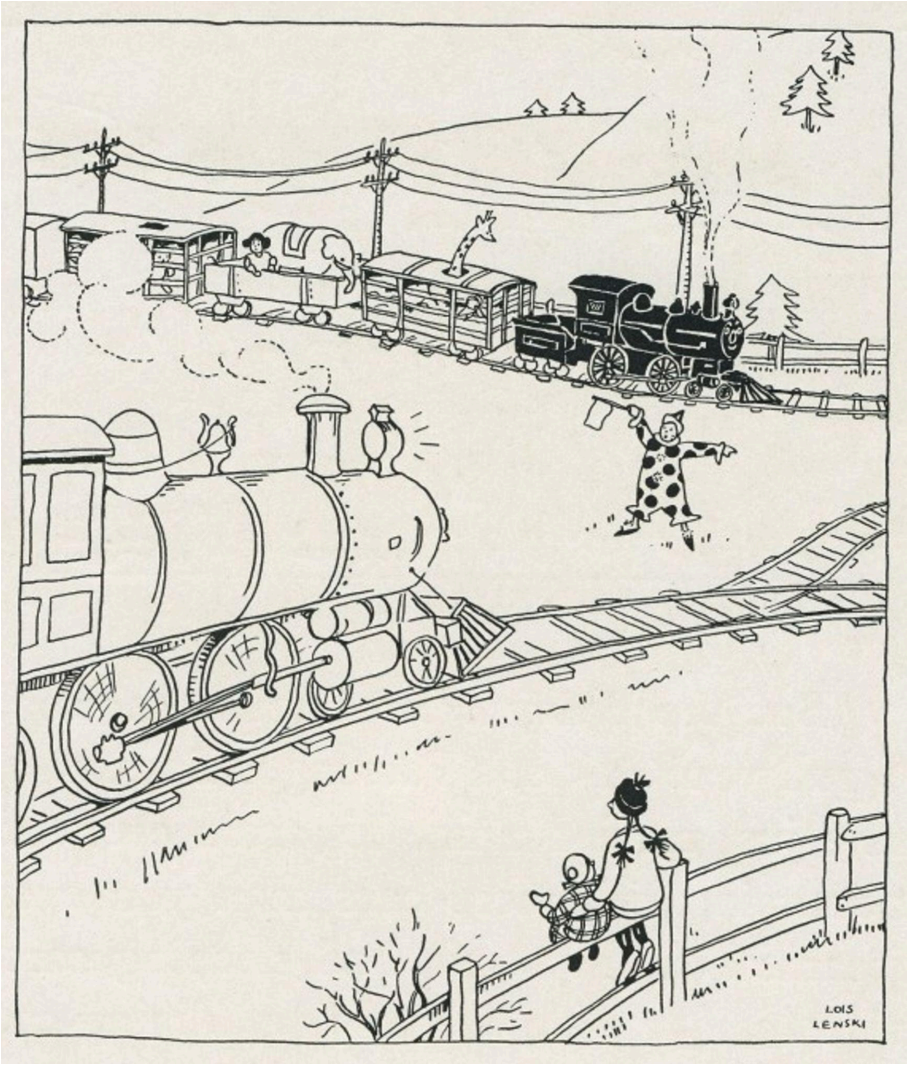
"I'm trying, Teddy Bear!" the Little Train replied. "I'm trying as hard as I can! But my engine is broken and my wheels won't turn."

Chapter 2: The Shiny New Engine

Then the Clown shouted, "Look! Here comes a Shiny New Engine! We can ask the Shiny New Engine to help us."

Chug-chug, chugga-chugga.

"Hey there, Shiny New Engine!" shouted the Giraffe while the Clown waved his flag to tell the engine to stop.



Toot! Toot! Huff-n-puff, huff-n-puff!

"Slow down!" shouted the Teddy Bear. "Please stop!" At last the Shiny New Engine began to slow down.

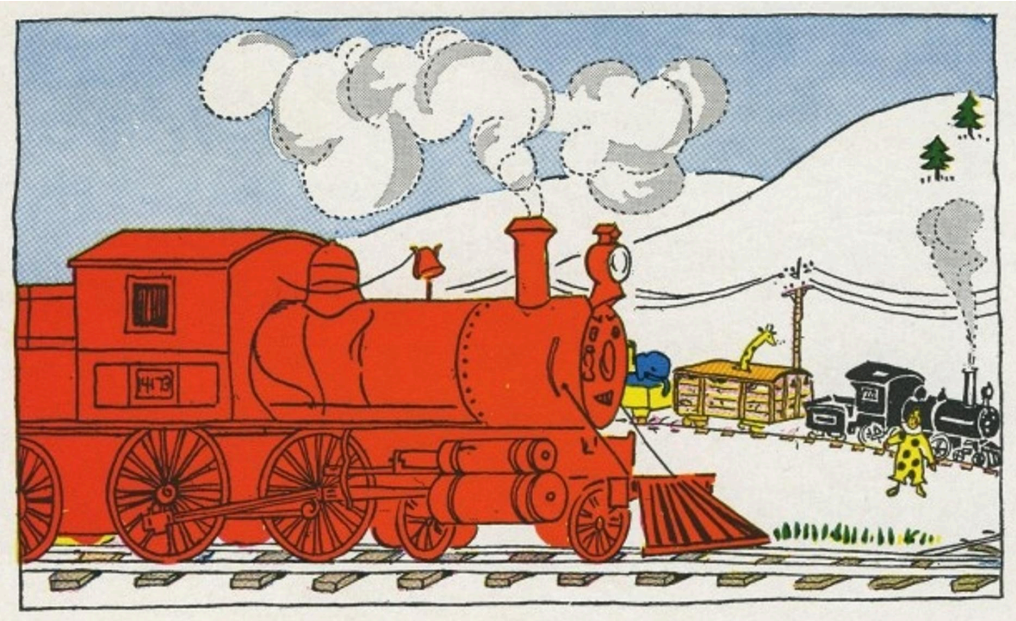
"Stop! Please!" the Elephant yelled, waving his trunk.

Then the Shiny New Engine finally slowed to a stop.

"Oh, Shiny New Engine!" said the Little Train, "my wheels won't move, and I need your help to get to the other side of the mountain."

But the Shiny New Engine just snorted at the Little Train.

"You want ME to pull YOU?" As she said this, the Shiny New Engine laughed at the Little Train. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."



"But I need your help!" explained the Little Train. "I'm full of toys and food for the children on the other side of the mountain."

"Toys? Food?" said the Shiny New Engine. "That's not my job. I'm a shiny new engine and I pull shiny new trains that are full of important passengers. My lounge cars have comfortable seats and lots of big windows, and my dining cars have fancy dishes served by fancy waiters, and my sleeping cars have luxurious beds with satin sheets and fluffy pillows."

The Clown smiled and said, "That all sounds very nice..."

The Baby Elephant interrupted before the Clown could finish his sentence. "But we really need your help!"

"There are toys and food in our little cars," the Teddy Bear explained.

"And little children are waiting for us on the other side of the mountain," said the Giraffe.

But the Shiny New Engine didn't care. "The children will just have to wait," she said. "I'm a Shiny New Engine, and I pull shiny new passenger trains. I don't pull little trains with little train cars like you. And now I'm going to the

train depot where I will find a shiny new passenger train waiting there for me to pull."

And before the Little Train could say anything in reply, the Shiny New Engine went rushing off down the track on her way to the train depot.

Chug-chug, chugga-chugga. Toot! Toot! Huff-n-puff, huff-n-puff! Choo-CHOO!

The Little Train and all the toys were very sad when the Shiny New Engine left them behind.

"That Shiny New Engine was not very nice!" said the Teddy Bear.

"And we really needed her to help us," added the Baby Elephant.

"What are we going to do now?" asked the Giraffe.

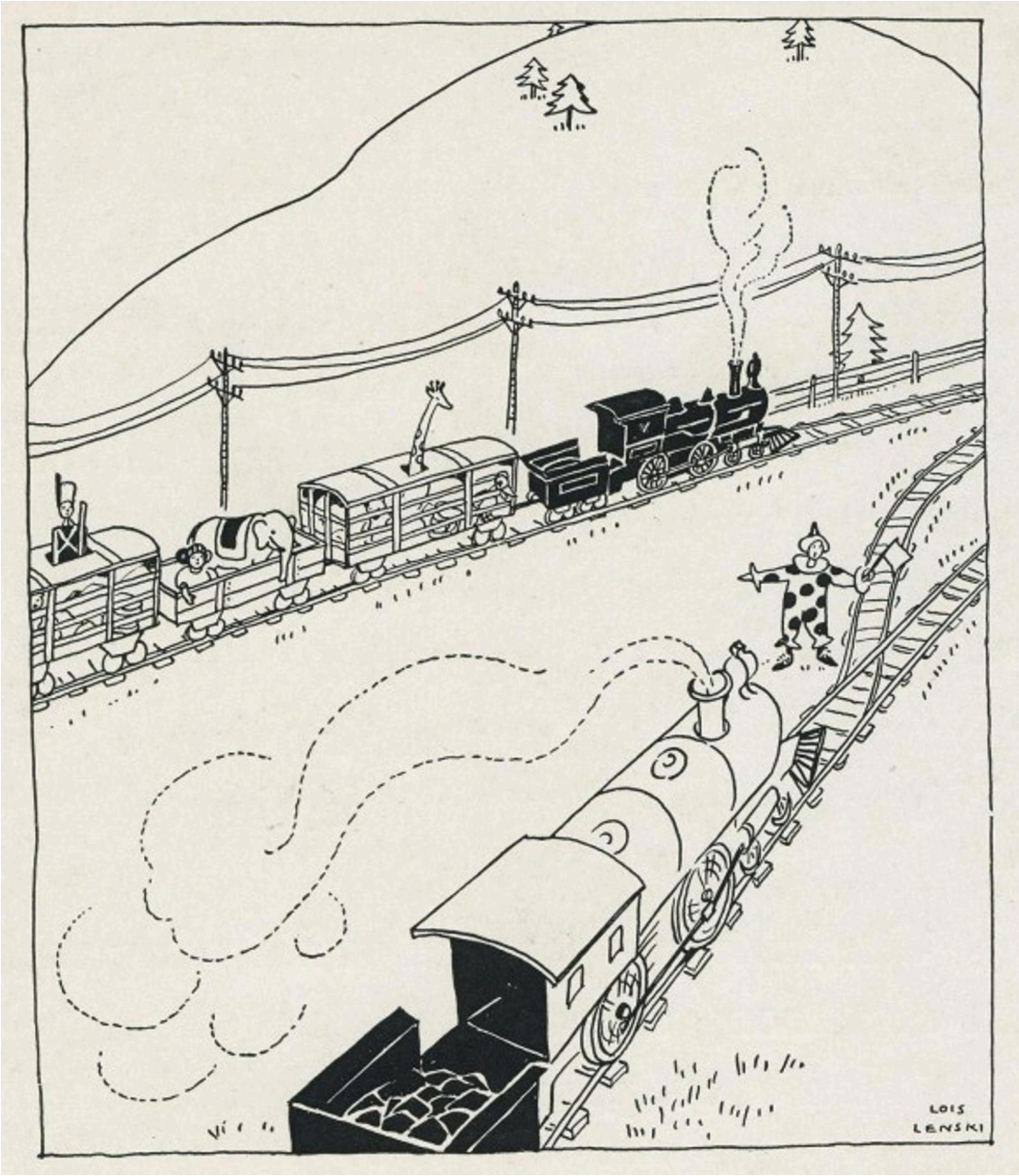
The Little Train sighed and said, "We'll have to find another engine who will help us."

"It's okay, Little Train!" said the Clown. "Don't worry, my friends! The Shiny New Engine is not the only one in the world. I can see another engine coming down the tracks already, and it looks like a big, strong engine. Maybe this engine will help us!"

Chapter 3: The Big Strong Engine

The little Toy Clown started waving his flag to make the Big Strong Engine slow down.

"Slow down, Big Engine! Stop please! Stop!" he shouted.

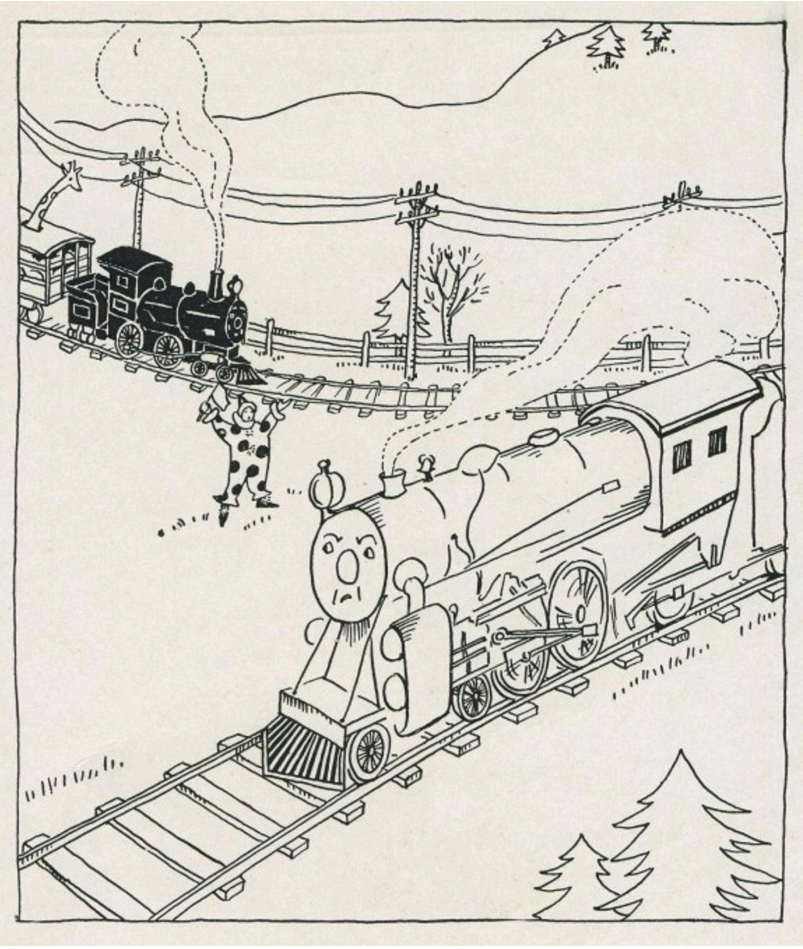


"We need your help!" yelled the Giraffe.

Then the Little Train explained the problem. "My own little engine is broken and my wheels won't turn."

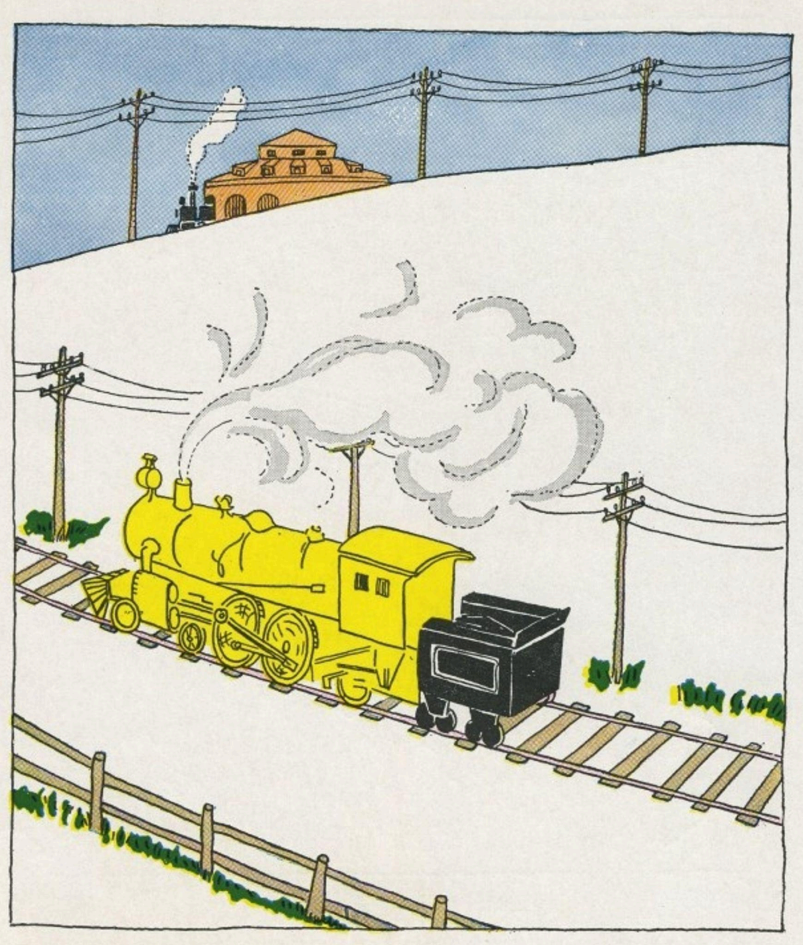
"And the little children are waiting for us to bring them their toys and their food," added the Teddy Bear.

"So we need you to pull us up, up, up, and over the mountain," said the Baby Elephant. "Can you do that for us, please?"



"Sorry, Little Train, but I am a Big Strong Engine! I pull freight trains that are full of big machines. I don't pull little trains with little train cars like you."

Then the Big Strong Engine started to move on down the track. "And now I've got to get going!" she said. "I'm on my way to the train depot to pull a train full of printing press machines that will print important books and important newspapers for important people to read. I can't stop to help you; I have big, important things to do."



And without waiting for a reply, the Big Strong Engine went huffing and puffing toward the train depot, leaving the Little Train and all the toys behind.

Toot! Toot! Huff-n-puff, huff-n-puff! Choo-CHOO! Chug-chug, chugga-chugga.

As the Little Train and the toys and dolls watched the Big Strong Engine disappear into the distance, they all felt very sad. But the Clown refused to give up!

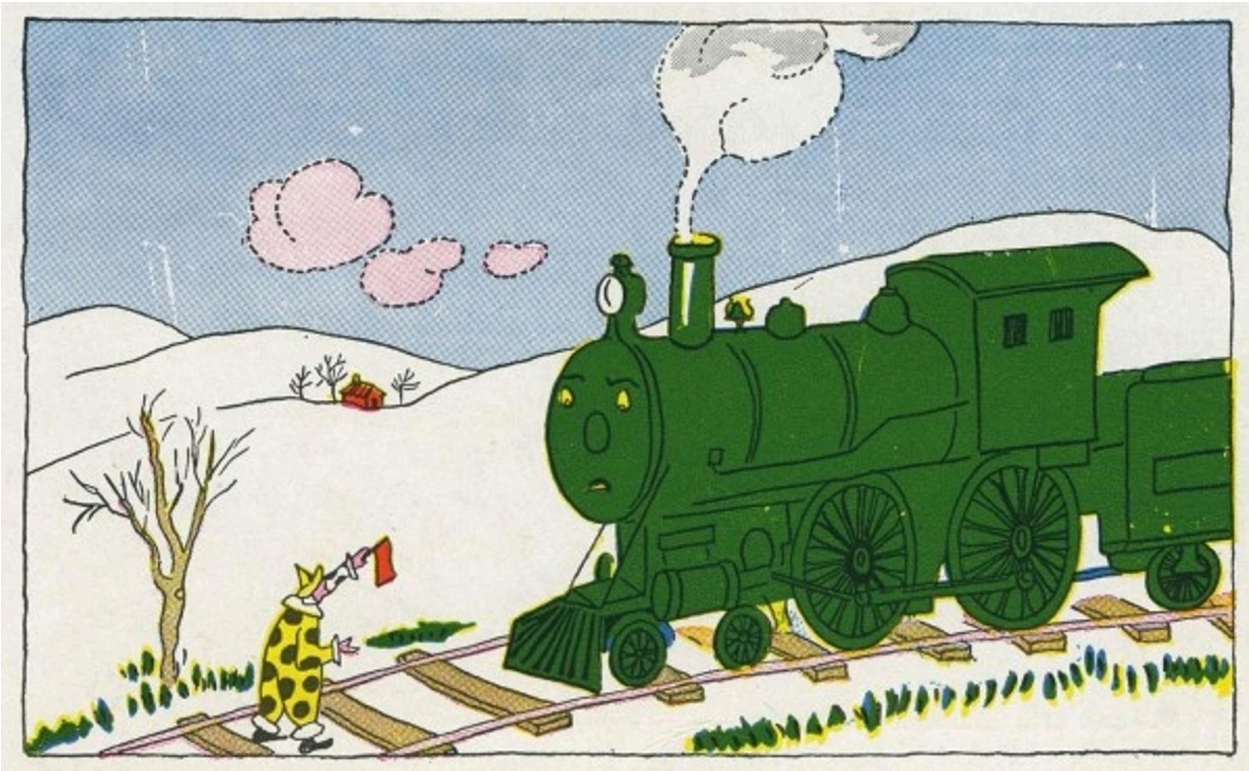
Chapter 4: The Rusty Old Engine

"Be brave, Little Train!" said the Clown. "Cheer up, my friends! I see another engine coming down the track now, and maybe this engine is the one who will help us!"

Huff-n-puff, huff-n-puff! Choo-CHOO! Chug-chug, chugga-chugga. Toot! Toot!

"This engine looks old and tired," the Clown continued, "but our train is just a little train. This Rusty Old Engine might be able to pull a little train."

"Engine! Oh, Engine!" shouted the Little Train. "Stop! Please stop!"



"Our train engine is broken," said the Baby Elephant, "and we need your help!"

"We need you to pull us up and over the mountain," the Teddy Bear explained.

"The little children are waiting for the toys and food that we are bringing," added the Giraffe.

Now this engine happened to be a very rusty, very old engine, and he slowly, slowly came to a stop.

"Hello, Little Train!" said the Rusty Old Engine. "Hello, Little Clown! Hello to all you toys!"

The Rusty Old Engine was wheezing as he spoke, and smoke was coming out of both his ears.

"As you all can see," he said, "I am a very old engine. I am covered with rust, and my wheels can barely turn. I would like to help you, but I am just too old and tired. I need to get to the train depot up ahead so that I can take a rest."

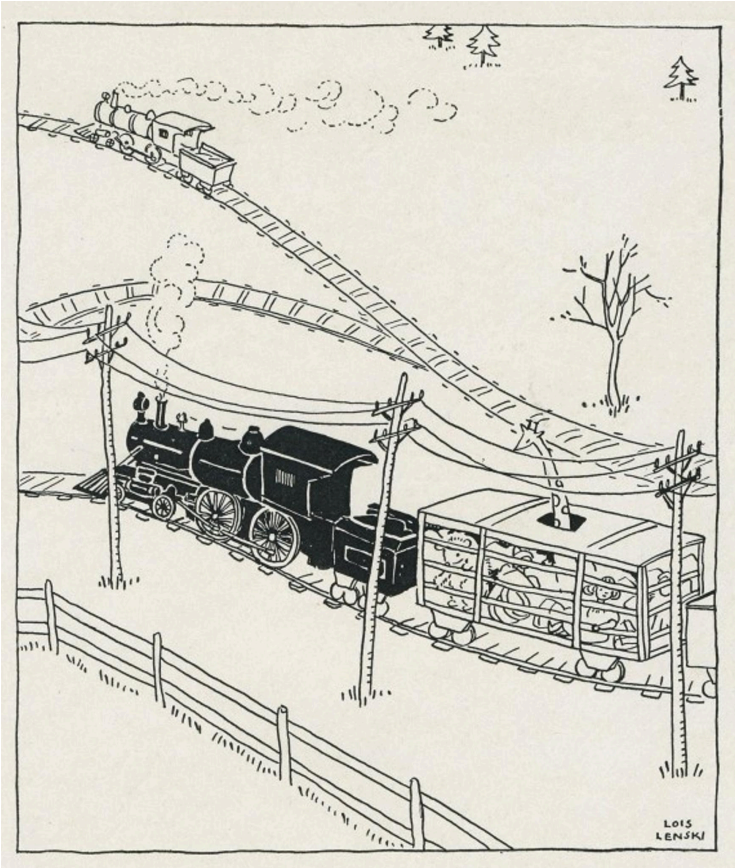
"But look," the Little Train protested, "I am only a little train! I think you can pull me up and over the mountain."

"Pull you? Up and over the mountain? I don't think I can, Little Train," said the Rusty Old Engine. And then he began moving away — slowly, slowly — down the track.

"No, Little Train," he repeated, "I don't think I can. I don't think I can. I don't think I can!"

And then the Rusty Old Engine was gone, and the Little Train was very, very sad, and the dolls and the toys all started to cry.

How were they ever going to get over the mountain to bring the toys and the food to the children who lived there?

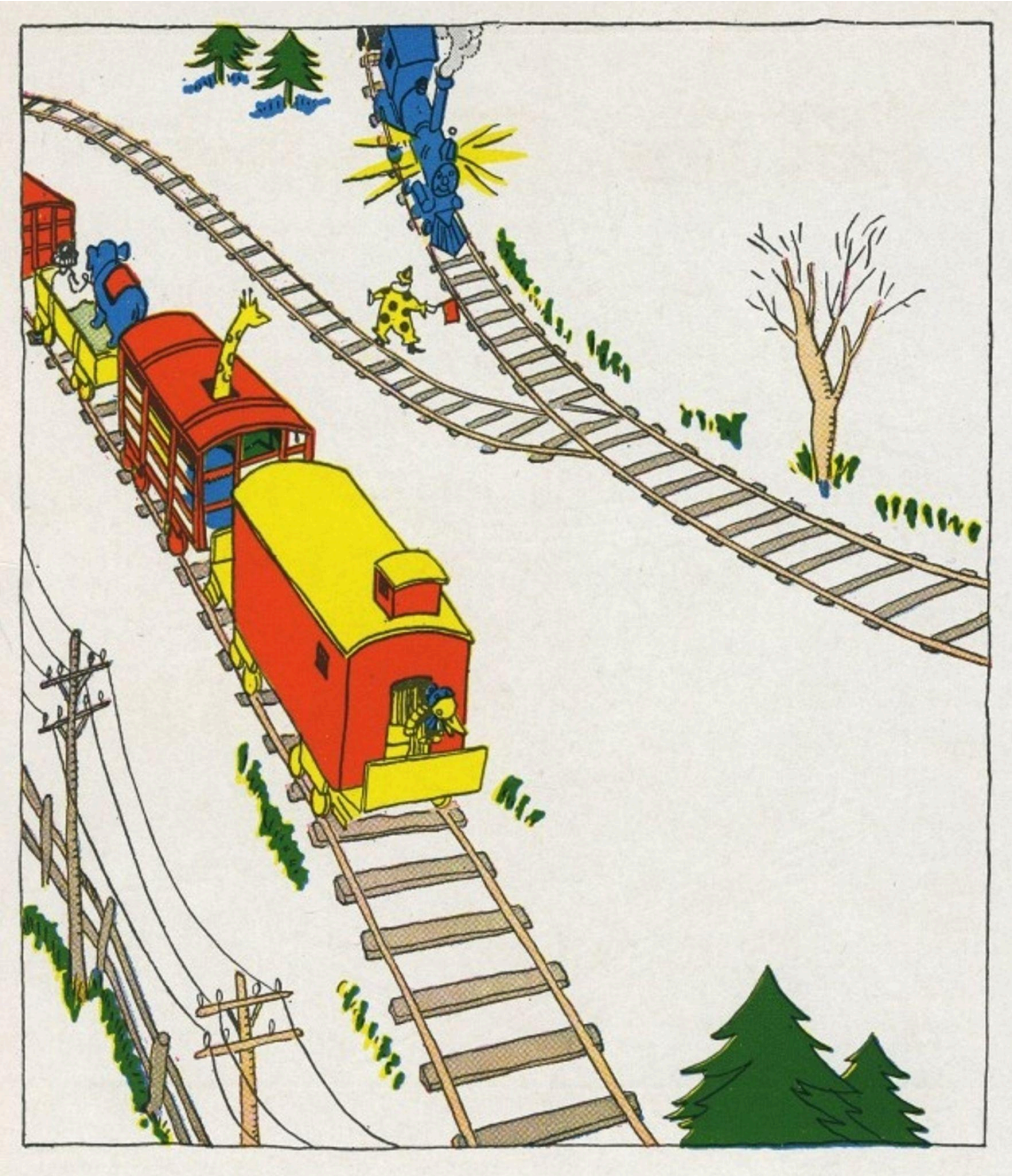


Chapter 5: The Little Blue Engine

"But wait! Look!" shouted the Clown. "I see another engine coming this way: it's a Little Blue Engine. She is a very small engine, but maybe she can help us!"

And sure enough: they all saw the Little Blue Engine chugging happily down the track.

Toot! Toot! Huff-n-puff, huff-n-puff! Choo-CHOO! Chug-chug, chugga-chugga.



The Clown started waving his flag, and the Little Blue Engine stopped as soon as she saw him.

"What's the matter, Mister Clown?" she asked.

Then the Little Engine saw that all the dolls and toys were crying.

"Oh, please don't cry!" she said. "Just tell me what's wrong. Maybe I can help!"

"We're trying to get to the other side of the mountain," explained the Teddy Bear.

"Little boys and girls are waiting there for us!" exclaimed the Baby Elephant.

"But we can't get there without your help," added the Giraffe.

"My own engine is broken, and my wheels will not turn," said the Little Train. "Can you help us, please?"

"Well, I'm not very big, and I've never pulled so many train cars before," the Little Blue Engine admitted. "Plus, I've never even been up and over the mountain."

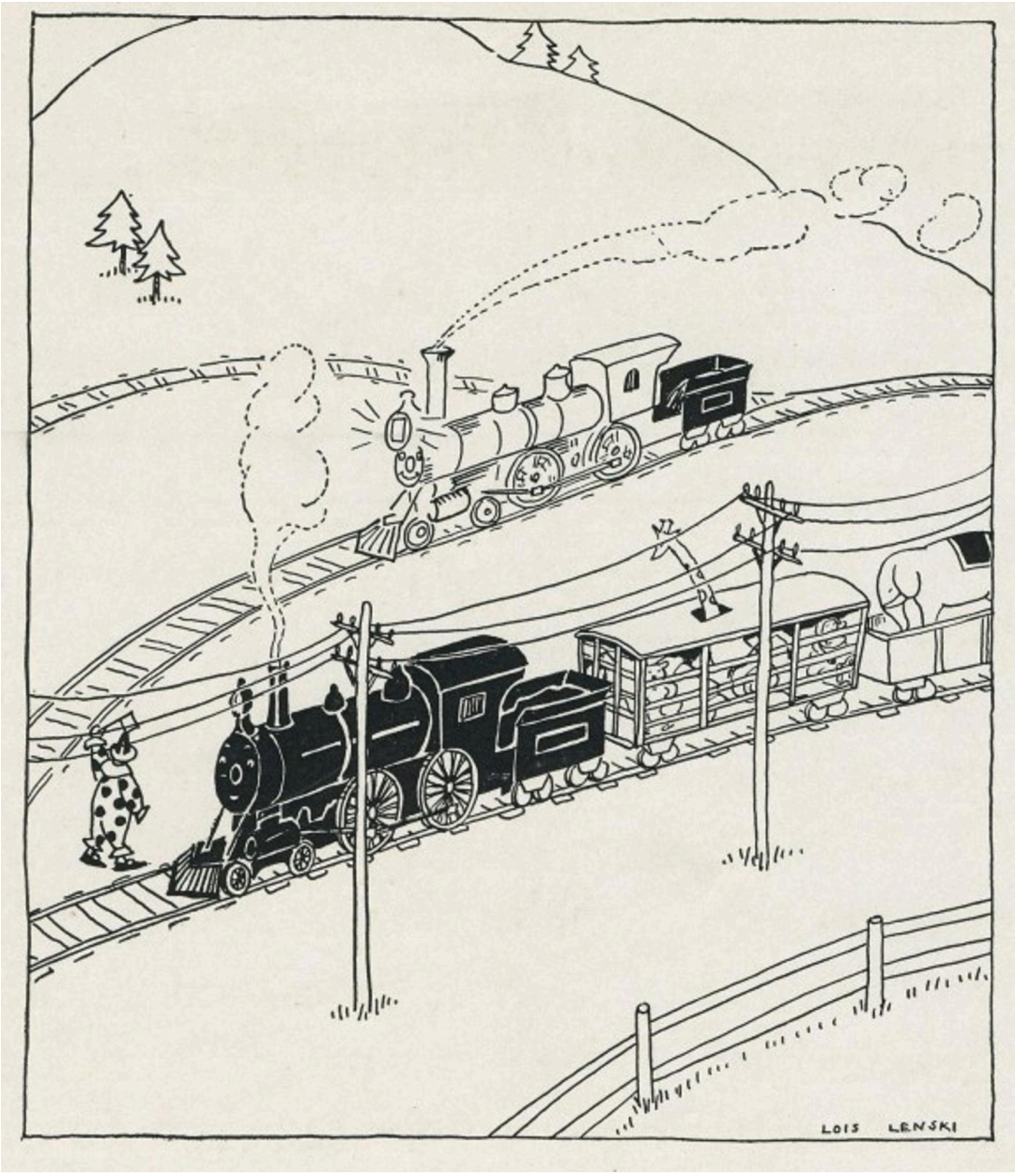
"But I think you can do it!" shouted the Little Train.

"And I think you can do it too!" the Baby Elephant yelled.

The Teddy Bear chimed in. "I do too!"

"Me too! Me too!" the Giraffe exclaimed.

And then the Clown spoke up for all the toys and all the dolls. "We all think you can do it, Little Blue Engine!"



And when the Little Blue Engine heard these encouraging words, and when she thought about all the children waiting on the other side of the mountain, she started to think she could do it too.

"I think I can," she said. "Yes, I think I can. I think I can!"

"Thank you, Little Blue Engine!" shouted the Little Clown. "Thank you so much. Just let me hitch you to the Train!"

"We are all so grateful to you, Little Blue Engine! Thank you, thank you!" said the Train. "And now it's time for all the toys to get back on board. All aboard! All aboard!"

So the Clown finished hitching the Engine to the Train, and then he got back on board, and so did the Baby Elephant, and the Giraffe, and the Little Teddy Bear too. And then, the Little Blue Engine started to pull... she pulled and she tugged...

"I think I can," she said. "I think I can!"

And she tugged and she pulled...

"I think I can. I think I can!"

And then, slowly, slowly, slowly, the Little Train started to move.

"We're moving!" shouted the Clown.

"Hurray!" the Giraffe cheered. "We're moving at last!"

"I think I can. I think I can!" repeated the Little Blue Engine.

Choo-CHOO! Chug-chug, chugga-chugga.

"Just look!" yelled the Teddy Bear. "We're going up over the mountain now!"

"Up and away!" The Elephant waved her trunk in excitement. "Up and away we go!"

The Little Blue Engine kept on repeating, "I think I can. I think I can!"

Toot! Toot! Huff-n-puff, huff-n-puff!

The Clown turned cartwheels in delight. "We're over the mountain!"

"And now we're going down!" The Giraffe started dancing.

"I think I can!" shouted the Engine. "I KNOW I can!

"Down, down, down, down!" The Teddy Bear was dancing too.

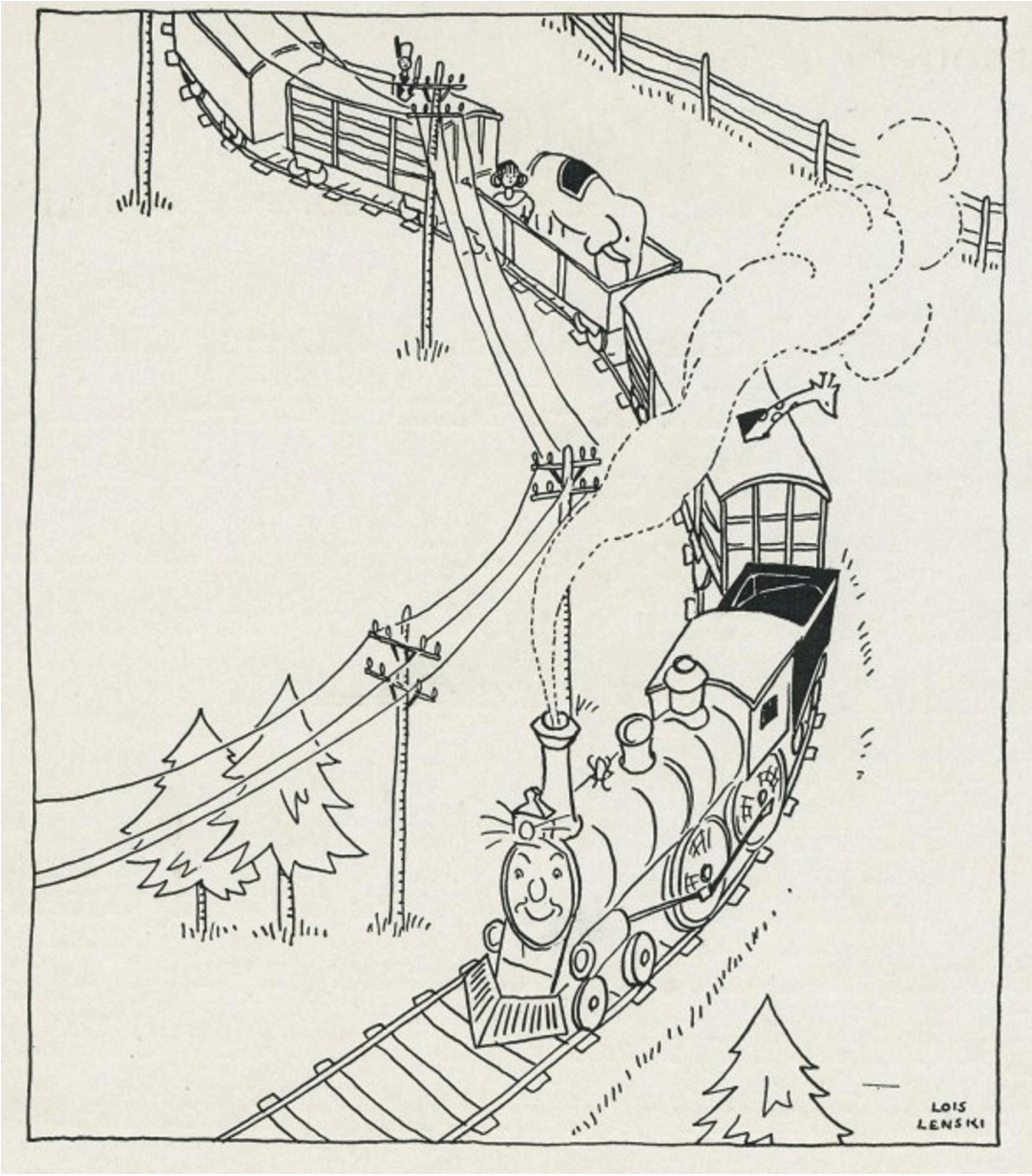
Now the Little Blue Engine was singing. "I know I can. I know I can! I know know KNOW I can!"

"We're almost there, Little Blue Engine!" exclaimed the Little Train. "You did it! You did it!"

And as the Little Train approached the station, the dolls and the toys all started to cheer. "Hurray for the Little Train!" they all shouted together. "And hurray for the Little Engine That Could!"

Then, at last, the Little Blue Engine pulled the Little Train and all of the train cars into the station where all the little girls and boys were waiting. "I thought I could," the Little Engine kept saying to herself, "I thought I could. I thought I could — and I did! I did!"

So the next time you are stuck and your wheels will not turn, just remember the Little Train and the Little Engine That Could... and see what YOU can do too!



THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT COULD

a script for for Readers Theater

by Laura Gibbs — LauraGibbs.net/LittleEngine — Make a Copy [version 1-1-2026]

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The scenes in this script correspond to the chapters in the preview. You can use the preview to help readers become familiar with the story and the characters.

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For example, you could create a new script with the Bear, Giraffe and Elephant replaced by different characters. Or you could also split the existing characters into multiple roles to create more roles for more readers: the Narrator's lines could be divided between Narrator 1 and Narrator 2, the Giraffe could be split into a Giraffe and a Lion, etc. You could also add more scenes to develop the story in greater detail, etc. The idea is to adapt the play for your own needs and goals.

There are gender pronouns used in the script for a few characters: the Little Train and the Little Blue Engine are "she," while the Clown and the Rusty Engine are "he," but you can change those pronouns as needed for your own cast of readers.

GENRE: Children's Literature.

CULTURE: U.S.

THEMES: kindness, cooperation, persistence, confidence.

LENGTH: 2000 words, appx. 20 minutes to perform.

ROLES: Narrator, Little Train, Clown, Giraffe, Teddy Bear, Elephant, Shiny New Engine, Big Strong Engine, Rusty Old Engine, Little Blue Engine + train sounds.

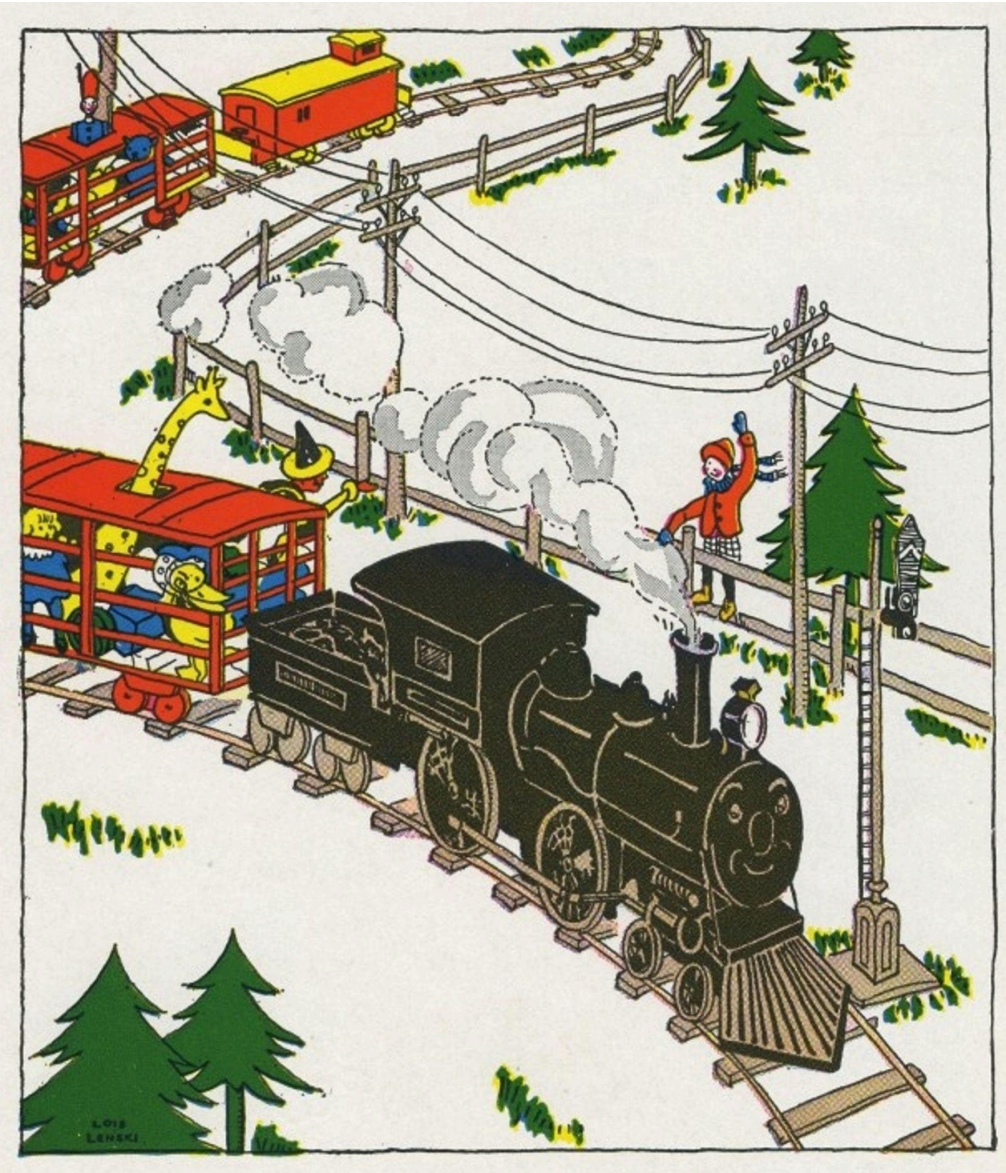
READERS: 11
minimum readers: 4 / the Clown-Giraffe-Bear-Elephant roles can be combined; all four Engines can be combined, and the Engines can make their own train sounds.

Scene 1: The Little Train

(SOUNDS): Chug-chug, chugga-chugga. Toot! Toot!

NARRATOR: Do you hear that? Once upon a time there was a Little Train.

(SOUNDS): Huff-n-puff, huff-n-puff! Choo-CHOO!



NARRATOR: The Little Train was a happy little train because her cars were full of all kinds of good things for children.

TRAIN: I'm carrying so many good things in all my cars! Just look: this first car is full of toy animals — there are giraffes with long necks and there are teddy bears who have almost no necks at all. There are toy rabbits and toy monkeys, toy piglets and cows. There's even a toy baby elephant!

ELEPHANT: I'm the Elephant! And there are not just stuffed animals riding the train. In the second car there are dolls — all kinds of dolls, along with a little toy clown. He's the funniest little toy clown that I've ever seen!

CLOWN: I'm the Clown! And look: the third train car is full of toys! There are toy trains and toy planes, spinning tops and bouncing balls, and all kinds of puzzles and games.

TEDDY BEAR: I'm the Teddy Bear! And let me show you what's inside the fourth car: it's full of picture books and coloring books, joke books and riddle books, story books and poetry books: there are all kinds of books!

GIRAFFE: I'm the Giraffe, and I'll show you what's inside the last car in the train: it's full of wonderful food! There

are big golden oranges and big red apples, with bottles of milk for breakfast and baskets of vegetables for dinner, plus cakes and cookies for dessert.

LITTLE TRAIN: Stuffed animals and dolls and toys, all those books and all that food — I'm carrying all these nice things to the little girls and boys who live on the other side of the mountain, and they will be so happy when I get there!

NARRATOR: So the train puffed and chugged...

(SOUNDS): Chug-chug, chugga-chugga. Toot! Toot! Huff-n-puff, huff-n-puff! Choo-CHOO!

NARRATOR: But then all of a sudden the train stopped!

TRAIN: Oh no! What's happening? My engine must be broken. My wheels aren't turning, and I can't go another inch.

CLOWN: Keep trying, Little Train!

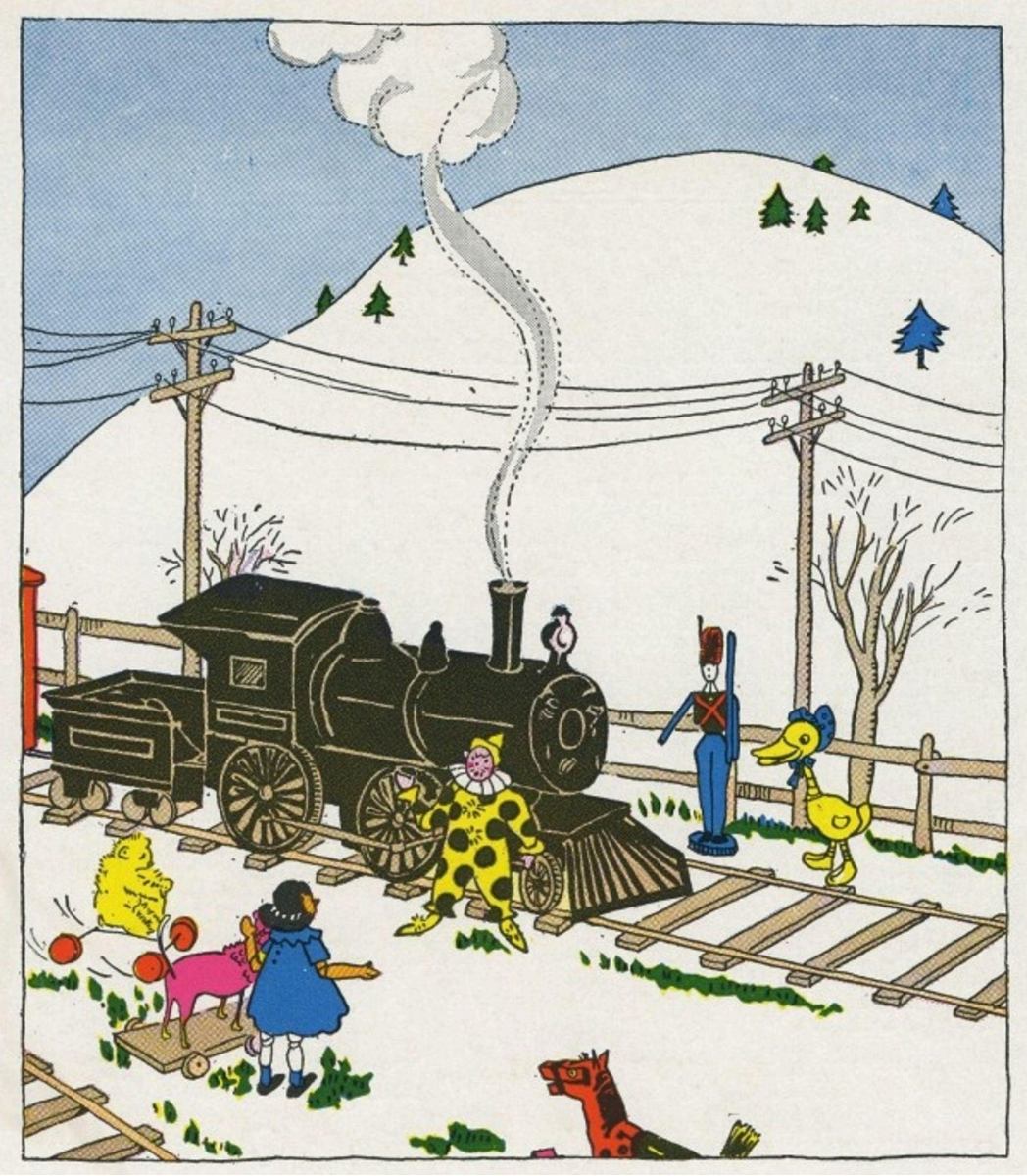
TRAIN: I'm trying! I'm trying as hard as I can! But my wheels won't turn.

ELEPHANT: Oh no! What are the children going to do? They are waiting for us on the other side of the mountain.

GIRAFFE: And they will be so sad without any nice toys to play with and without any nice food to eat.

TEDDY BEAR: Please keep trying, Little Train!

TRAIN: I'm trying, Teddy Bear! I'm trying! But my engine is broken and my wheels won't turn.

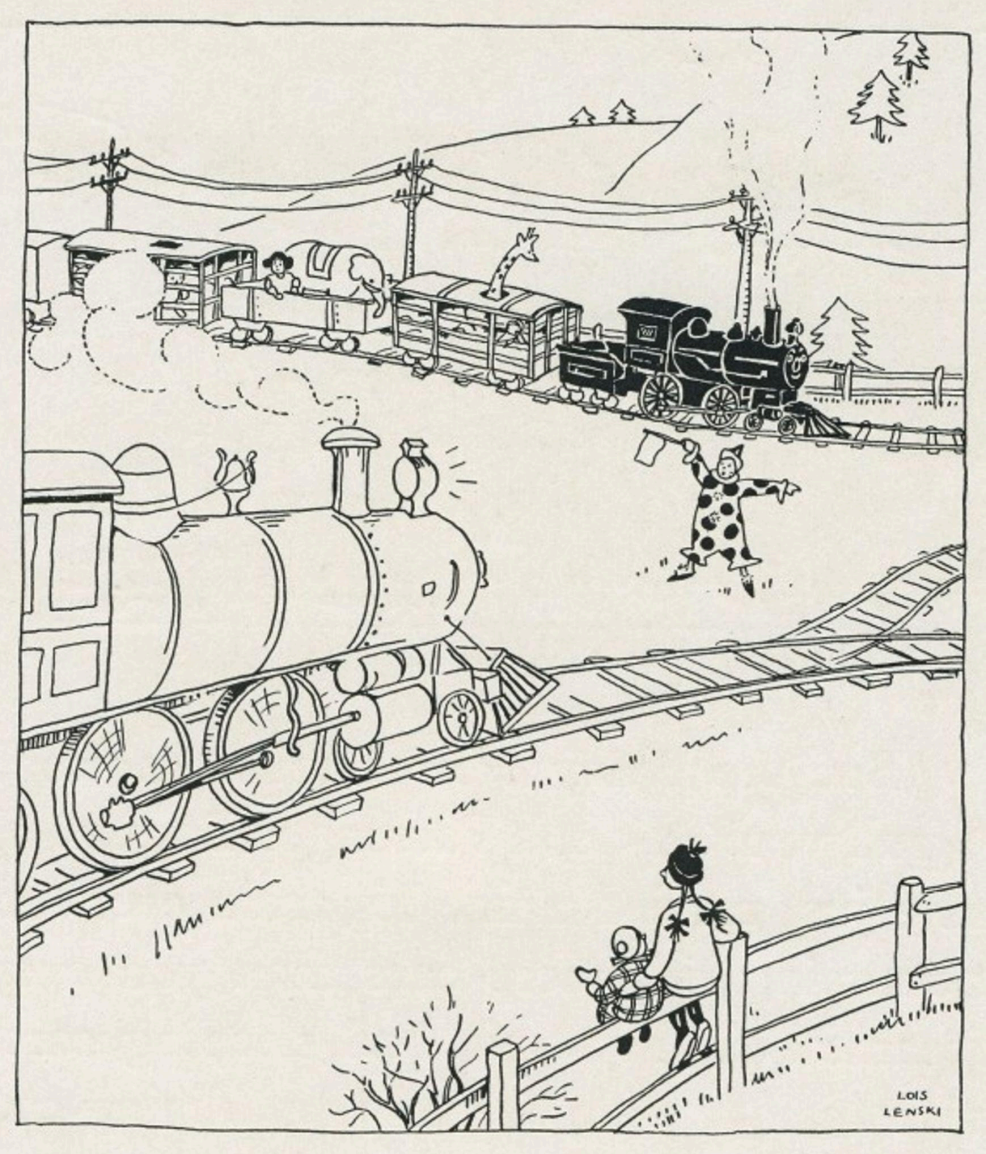


Scene 2: The Shiny New Engine

CLOWN: Look! Here comes a Shiny New Engine! We can ask the Shiny New Engine to help us.

(SOUNDS): Chug-chug, chugga-chugga.

GIRAFFE: Hey there, Shiny New Engine!



(SOUNDS): Toot! Toot!

TEDDY BEAR: Slow down! Stop! Please stop!

(SOUNDS): Huff-n-puff, huff-n-puff!

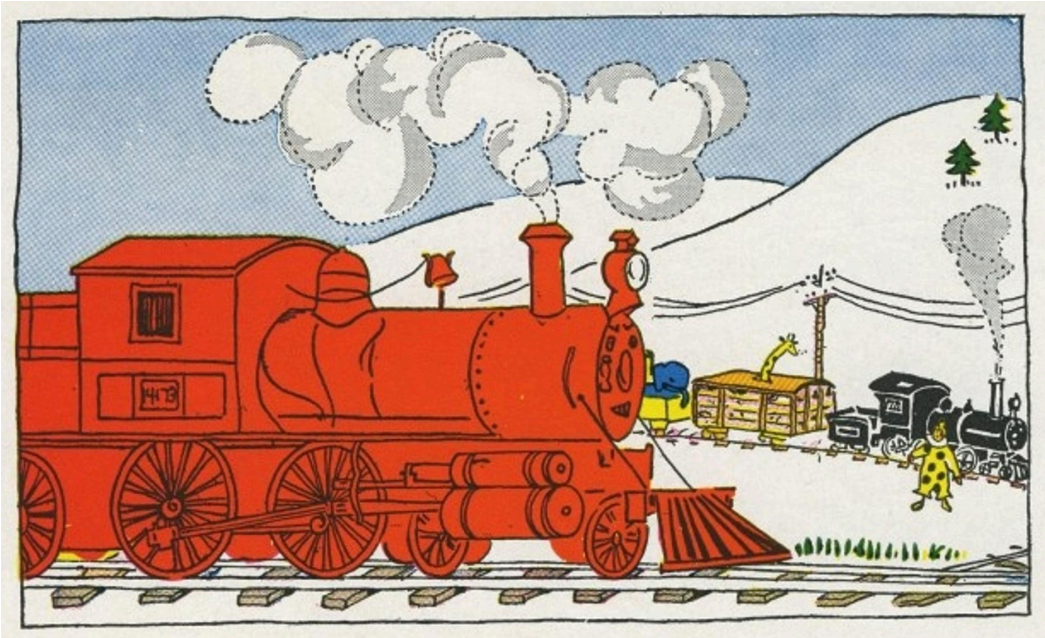
ELEPHANT: Stop! Please!

(SOUNDS): Choo-CHOO!

TRAIN: Shiny New Engine! My wheels won't move, and I need your help to get to the other side of the mountain.

NARRATOR: But the Shiny New Engine just snorted at the Little Train.

SHINY NEW ENGINE: You want ME to pull YOU? That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard.



TRAIN: But I need your help! I'm full of toys and food for the children on the other side of the mountain.

SHINY NEW ENGINE: Toys? Food? That's not my job. I'm a shiny new engine and I pull shiny new trains that are full of important passengers. My lounge cars have comfortable seats and lots of big windows, and my dining cars have fancy dishes served by fancy waiters, and my sleeping cars have luxurious beds with satin sheets and fluffy pillows.

CLOWN: That all sounds very nice...

ELEPHANT: But we really need your help!

TEDDY BEAR: There are toys and food in our little cars —

GIRAFFE: And little children are waiting for us on the other side of the mountain.

SHINY NEW ENGINE: Then the children will just have to wait. I'm a Shiny New Engine, and I pull shiny new passenger trains. I don't pull little trains with little train cars like you. And now I'm going to the train depot where I will find a shiny new passenger train that I can pull.

NARRATOR: And before the Little Train could say anything in reply, the Shiny New Engine went rushing off down the track on her way to the train depot.

(SOUNDS): Chug-chug, chugga-chugga. Toot! Toot! Huff-n-puff, huff-n-puff! Choo-CHOO!

NARRATOR: The Little Train and all the toys were very sad when the Shiny New Engine left them behind.

TEDDY BEAR: That Shiny New Engine was not very nice!

ELEPHANT: And we really needed her to help us.

GIRAFFE: What are we going to do now?

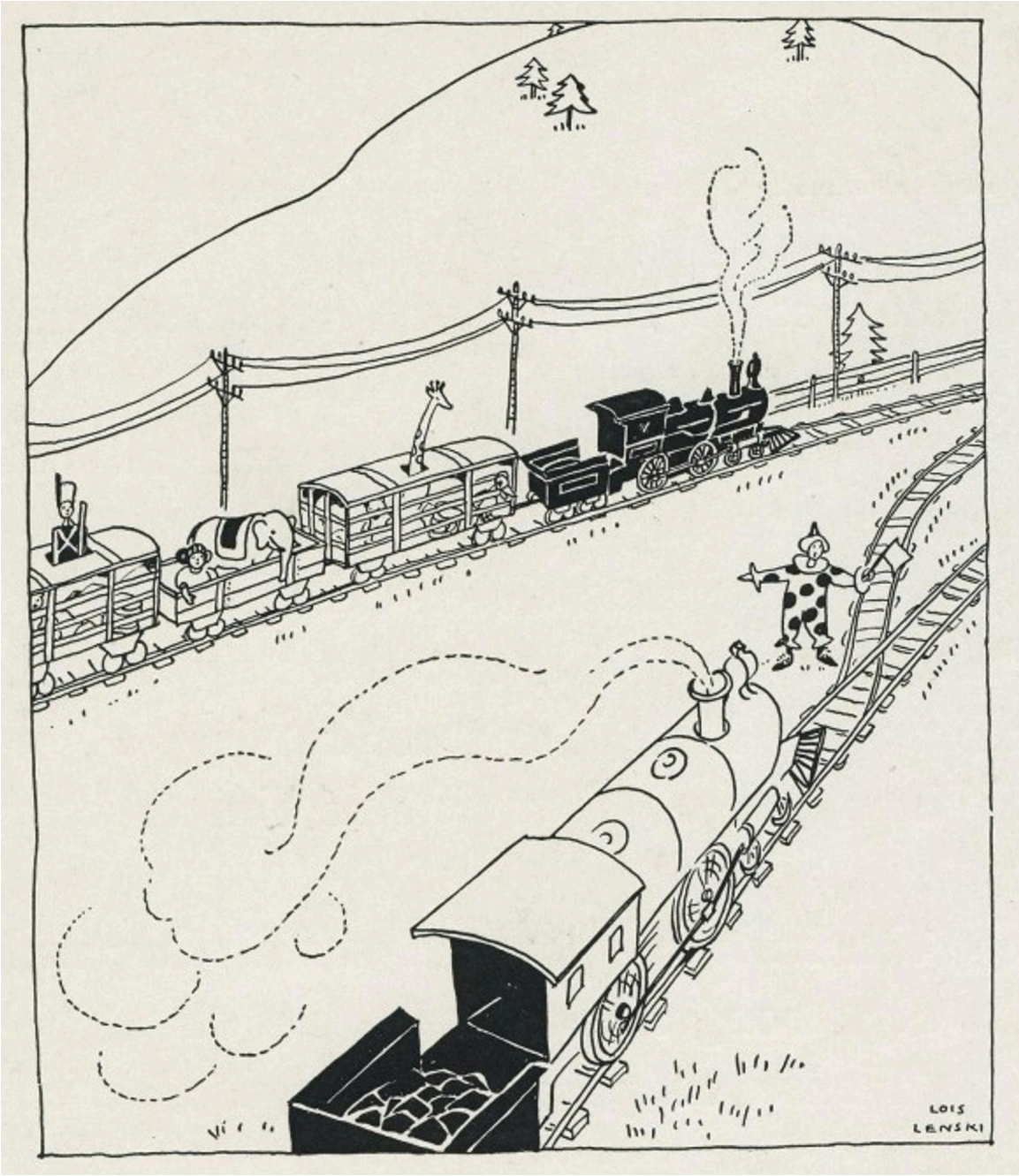
LITTLE TRAIN: We have to find another engine who will help us.

CLOWN: It's okay, Little Train! Don't worry, my friends! The Shiny New Engine is not the only one in the world. I can see another engine coming down the tracks already, and it looks like a big, strong engine. Maybe this engine will help us!

Scene 3: The Big Strong Engine

NARRATOR: The little toy Clown started waving his flag...

CLOWN: Slow down there, Engine! Stop please! Stop!

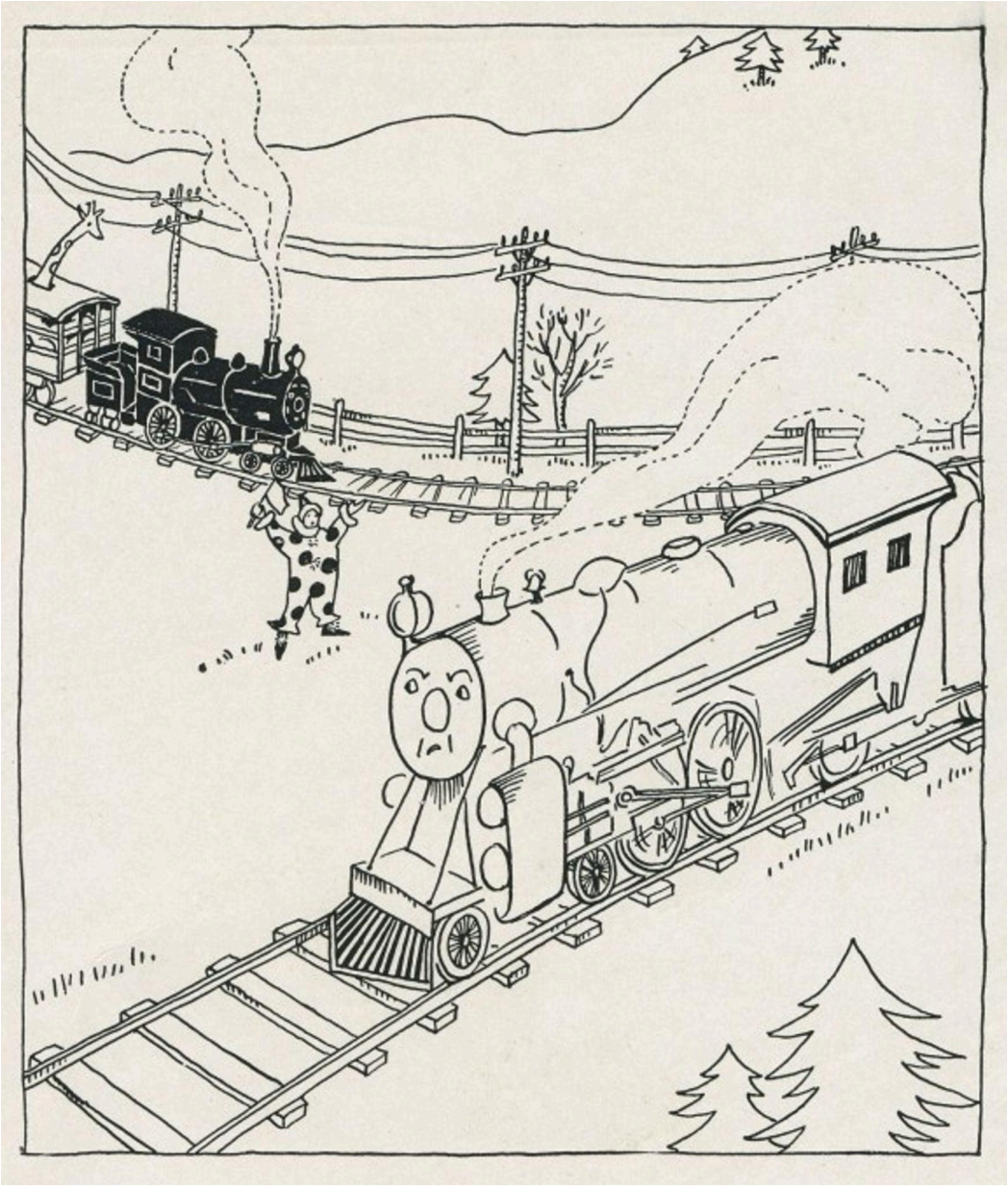


GIRAFFE: We need your help!

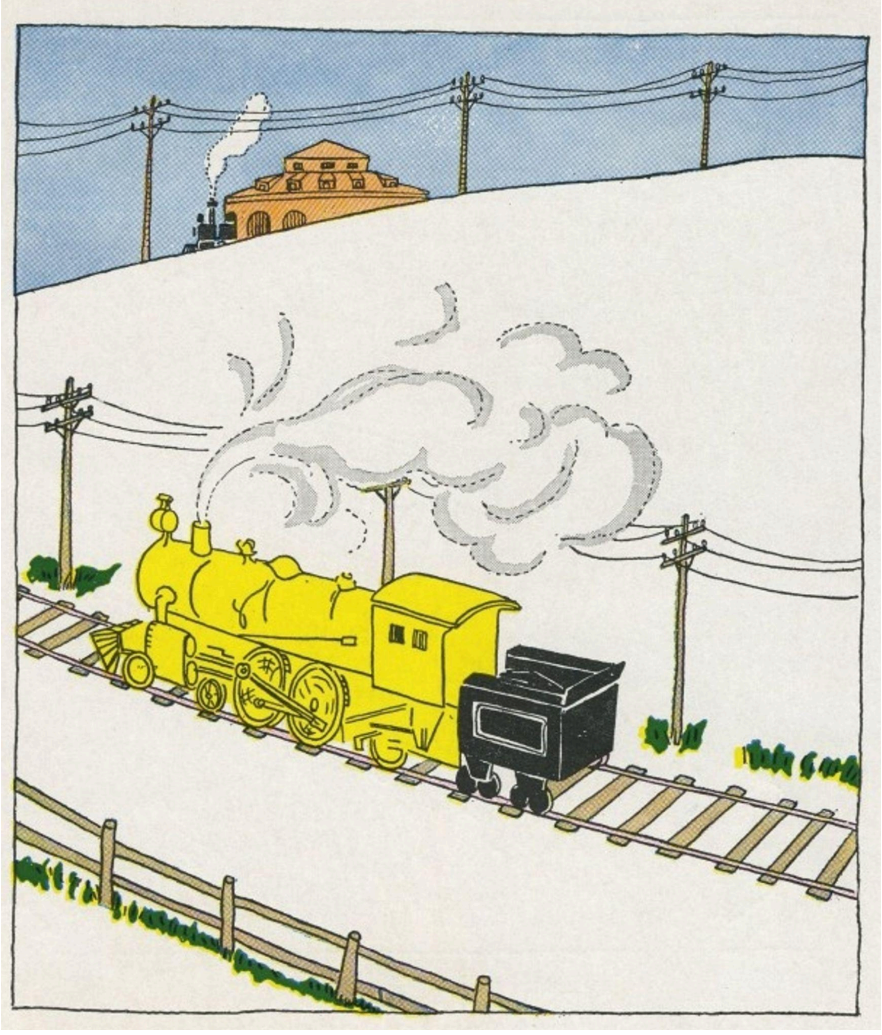
LITTLE TRAIN: My own little engine is broken and my wheels will not turn.

TEDDY BEAR: The little children are waiting for us to bring them their toys and their food.

ELEPHANT: So we need you to pull us up, up, up, and over the mountain. Can you do that for us, please?



BIG STRONG ENGINE: Sorry, Little Train, but I am a Big Strong Engine! I pull freight trains that are full of big machines. I don't pull little trains with little train cars like you. And now I've got to get going! I'm on my way to the train depot to pull a train full of big printing presses that will print important books and important newspapers for important people to read. I don't have time to help you; I have big, important things to do.



NARRATOR: And without waiting for a reply, the Big Strong Engine went huffing and puffing toward the train depot.

(SOUNDS): Toot! Toot! Huff-n-puff, huff-n-puff! Choo-CHOO! Chug-chug, chugga-chugga.

NARRATOR: As the Little Train and the toys and dolls watched the Big Strong Engine disappear into the distance, they all felt very sad. But the Clown refused to give up!

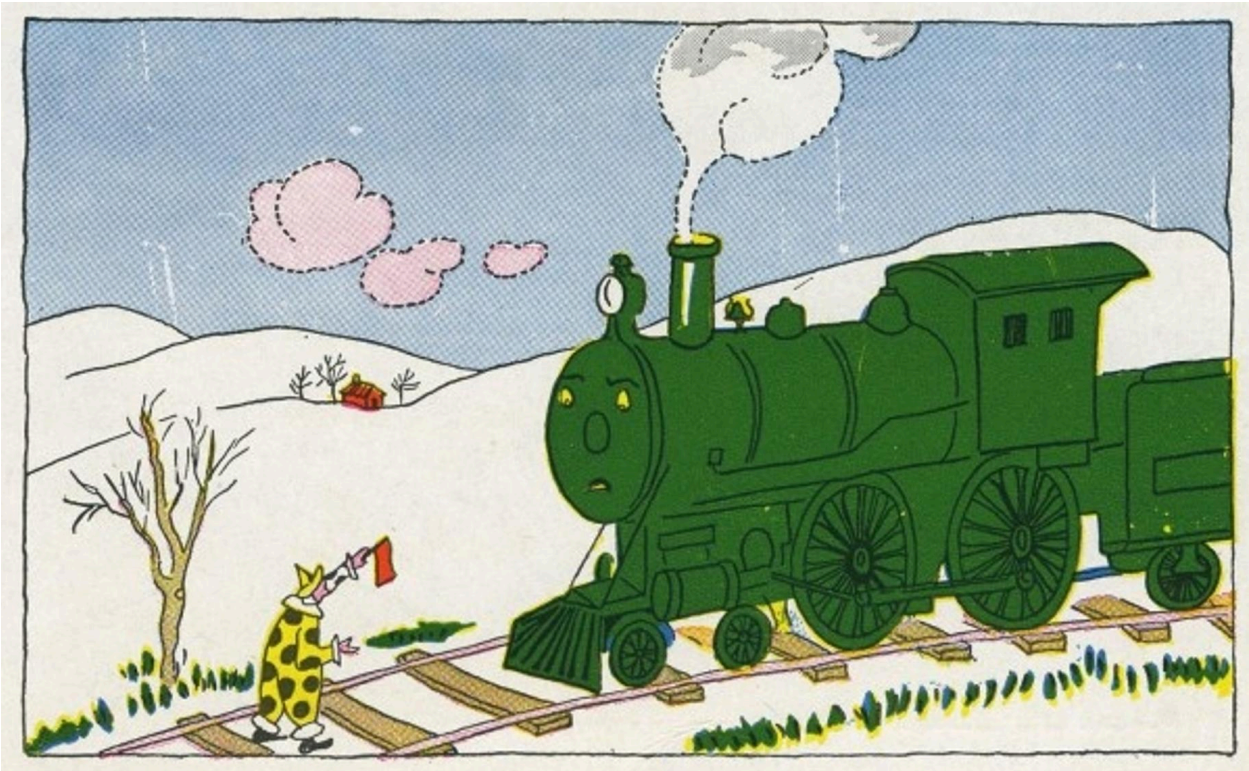
Scene 4: The Rusty Old Engine

CLOWN: Be brave, Little Train! Cheer up, my little friends! I can see another engine coming down the track now, and maybe this engine is the one who will help us!

(SOUNDS): Huff-n-puff, huff-n-puff! Choo-CHOO! Chug-chug, chugga-chugga. Toot! Toot!

CLOWN: This engine looks old and tired, but our train is just a little train. He might be able to pull a little train.

LITTLE TRAIN: Engine! Oh, Engine! Please stop!



ELEPHANT: Our train engine is broken, and we need your help!

TEDDY BEAR: We need you to pull us up and over the mountain.

GIRAFFE: The little children are waiting for the toys and food that we are bringing.

NARRATOR: This engine happened to be a very rusty, very old engine, and he slowly, slowly came to a stop.

RUSTY OLD ENGINE: Hello, Little Train! Hello, Little Clown! Hello to all you toys!

NARRATOR: The Rusty Old Engine was wheezing as he spoke, and smoke was coming out of both his ears.

RUSTY OLD ENGINE: As you all can see, I am a very old engine. I am covered with rust, and my wheels can barely turn. I would like to help you, but I am just too old and tired. I need to get to the train depot up there so that I can take a rest.

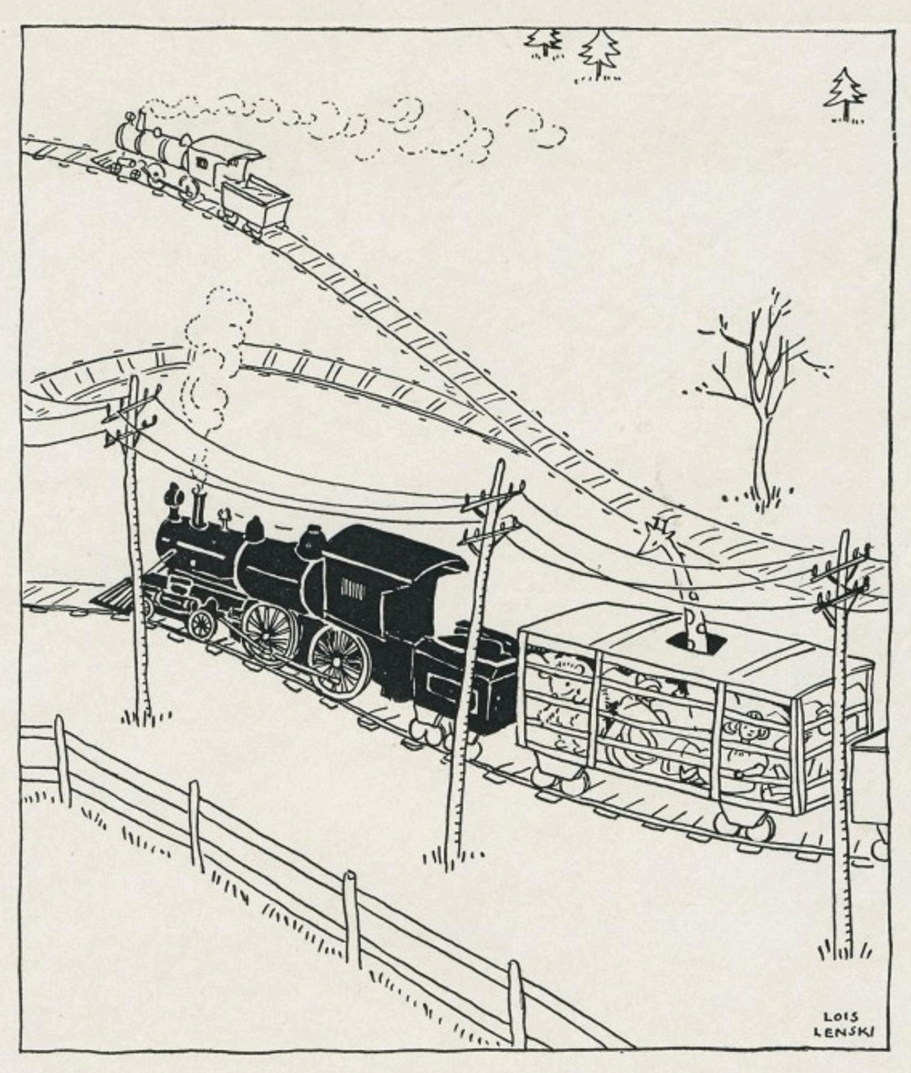
LITTLE TRAIN: But look: I am only a little train. I think you could do it! Please pull me up and over the mountain!

RUSTY OLD ENGINE: Pull you? Up and over the mountain? I don't think I can, Little Train.

NARRATOR: And then the Engine began moving away, slowly, slowly, down the track.

RUSTY OLD ENGINE: No, Little Train, I don't think I can. I don't think I can. I don't think I can!

NARRATOR: And then the Rusty Old Engine was gone, and the Little Train was very, very sad, and the dolls and the toys all started to cry.

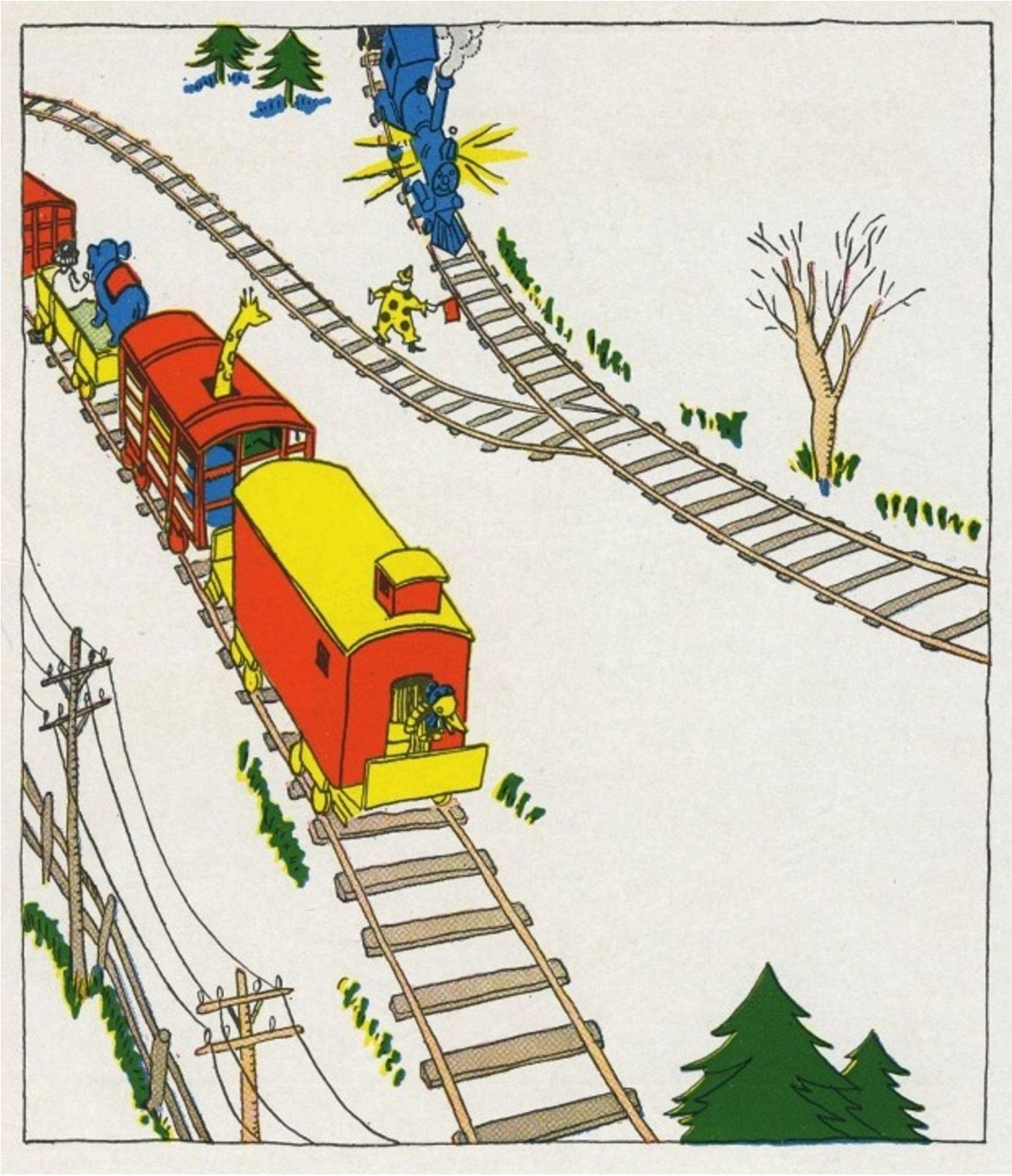


Scene 5: The Little Blue Engine

CLOWN: But wait! Look! I see another engine coming: it's a Little Blue Engine. She is a very small engine, but maybe she can help us!

NARRATOR: The Little Blue Engine came chugging happily down the track.

(SOUNDS): Toot! Toot! Huff-n-puff, huff-n-puff!
Choo-CHOO! Chug-chug, chugga-chugga.



NARRATOR: The Clown started waving his flag, and the Little Blue Engine stopped as soon as she saw him.

LITTLE BLUE ENGINE: What's the matter, Mister Clown?

NARRATOR: Then the Little Engine saw that all the dolls and toys were crying.

LITTLE BLUE ENGINE: Oh, please don't cry! Just tell me what's wrong. Maybe I can help!

TEDDY BEAR: We're trying to get to the other side of the mountain.

ELEPHANT: Little boys and girls are waiting there for us!

GIRAFFE: But we cannot get there without your help.

LITTLE TRAIN: My own engine is broken, and my wheels will not turn. Can you help us, please?

LITTLE BLUE ENGINE: Well, I'm not very big, and I've never pulled so many train cars before. Plus, I've never even been up and over the mountain.

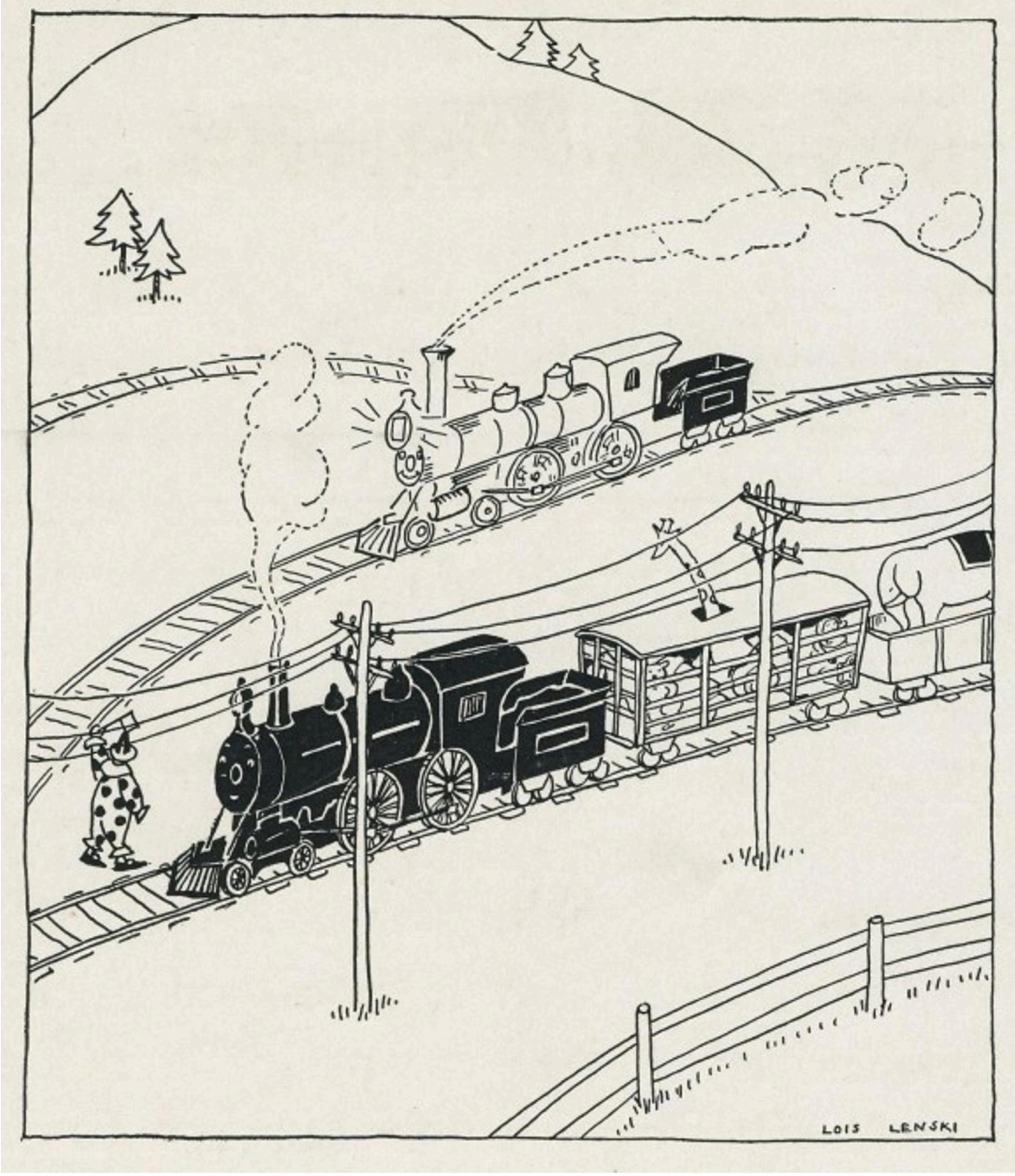
LITTLE TRAIN: But I think you can do it!

ELEPHANT: And I think you can do it too!

TEDDY BEAR: I do too!

GIRAFFE: Me too! Me too!

CLOWN: We all think you can do it, Little Blue Engine!



NARRATOR: And when the Little Blue Engine heard these encouraging words, and when she thought about all the children waiting on the other side of the mountain, she started to think she could do it too.

LITTLE BLUE ENGINE: I think I can. I think I can. I think I can!

CLOWN: Thank you, Little Blue Engine! Let me hitch you to the Little Train!

LITTLE TRAIN: We are all so grateful to you, Little Blue Engine! Thank you, thank you! And now it's time for all the toys to get back on board. All aboard! All aboard!

NARRATOR: So the Clown finished hitching the Engine to the Train, and then he got back on board, and so did the Elephant, and the Giraffe, and the Little Teddy Bear too. And then, the Little Blue Engine started to pull... she pulled and she tugged...

LITTLE BLUE ENGINE: I think I can. I think I can!

NARRATOR: And she tugged and she pulled...

LITTLE ENGINE: I think I can. I think I can!

NARRATOR: And then, slowly, slowly, slowly, the Little Train started to move.

CLOWN: We're moving!

GIRAFFE: Hurray! We're moving at last!

LITTLE BLUE ENGINE: I think I can. I think I can!

(SOUNDS): Choo-CHOO! Chug-chug, chugga-chugga.

TEDDY BEAR: We're going up over the mountain now!

ELEPHANT: Up and away! Up and away we go!

LITTLE BLUE ENGINE: I think I can. I think I can!

(SOUNDS): Toot! Toot! Huff-n-puff, huff-n-puff!

CLOWN: We're over the mountain!

GIRAFFE: And now we're going down!

LITTLE BLUE ENGINE: I think I can. I know I can!

TEDDY BEAR: Down, down, down, down!

LITTLE BLUE ENGINE: I know I can. I know I can!

LITTLE TRAIN: We're almost there, Little Blue Engine! You did it! You did it!

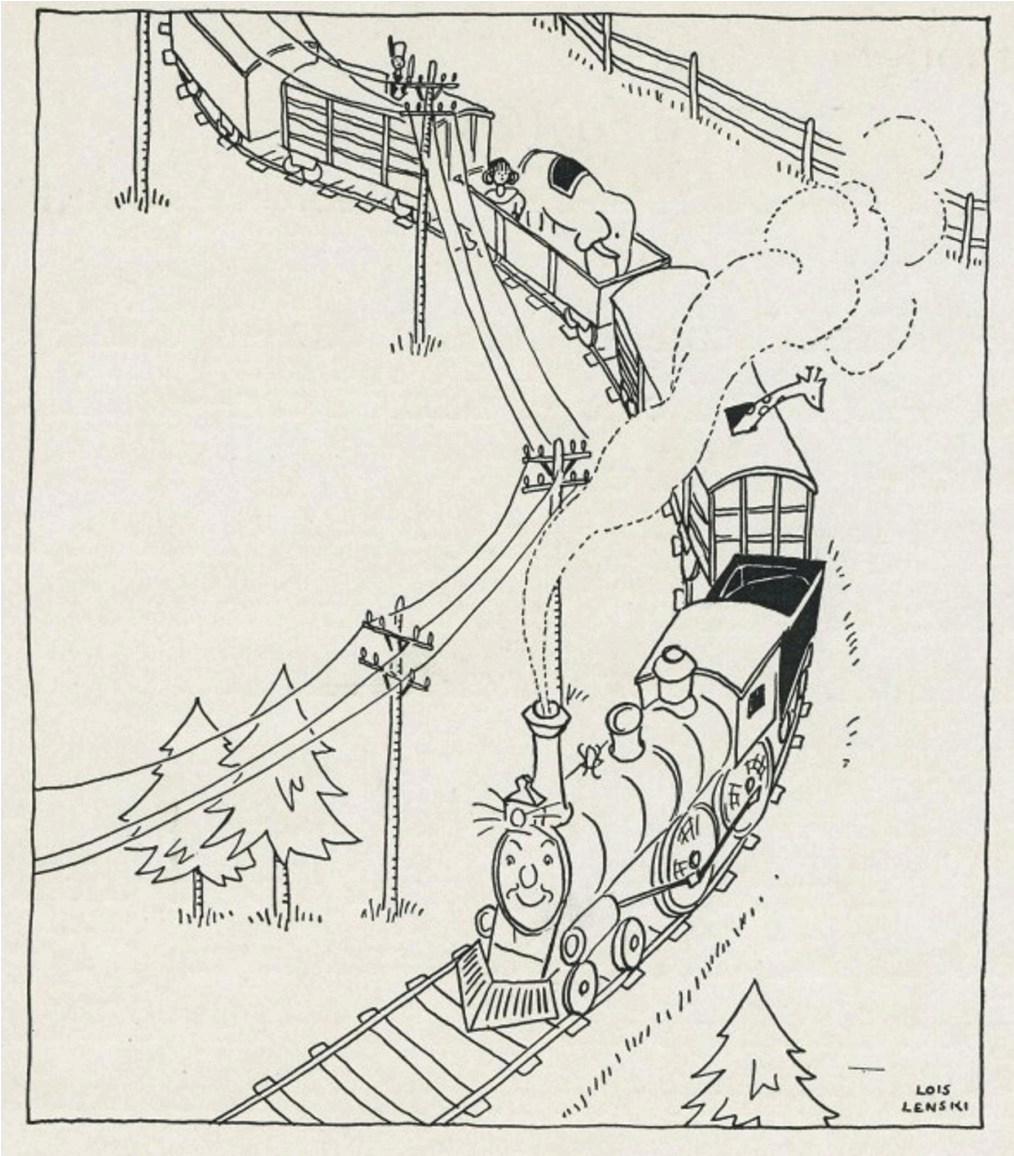
NARRATOR: And as the Little Train and the Little Blue Engine approached the station, all the dolls and toys started to cheer:

ALL: Hurray for the Little Train! And hurray for the Little Engine That Could!

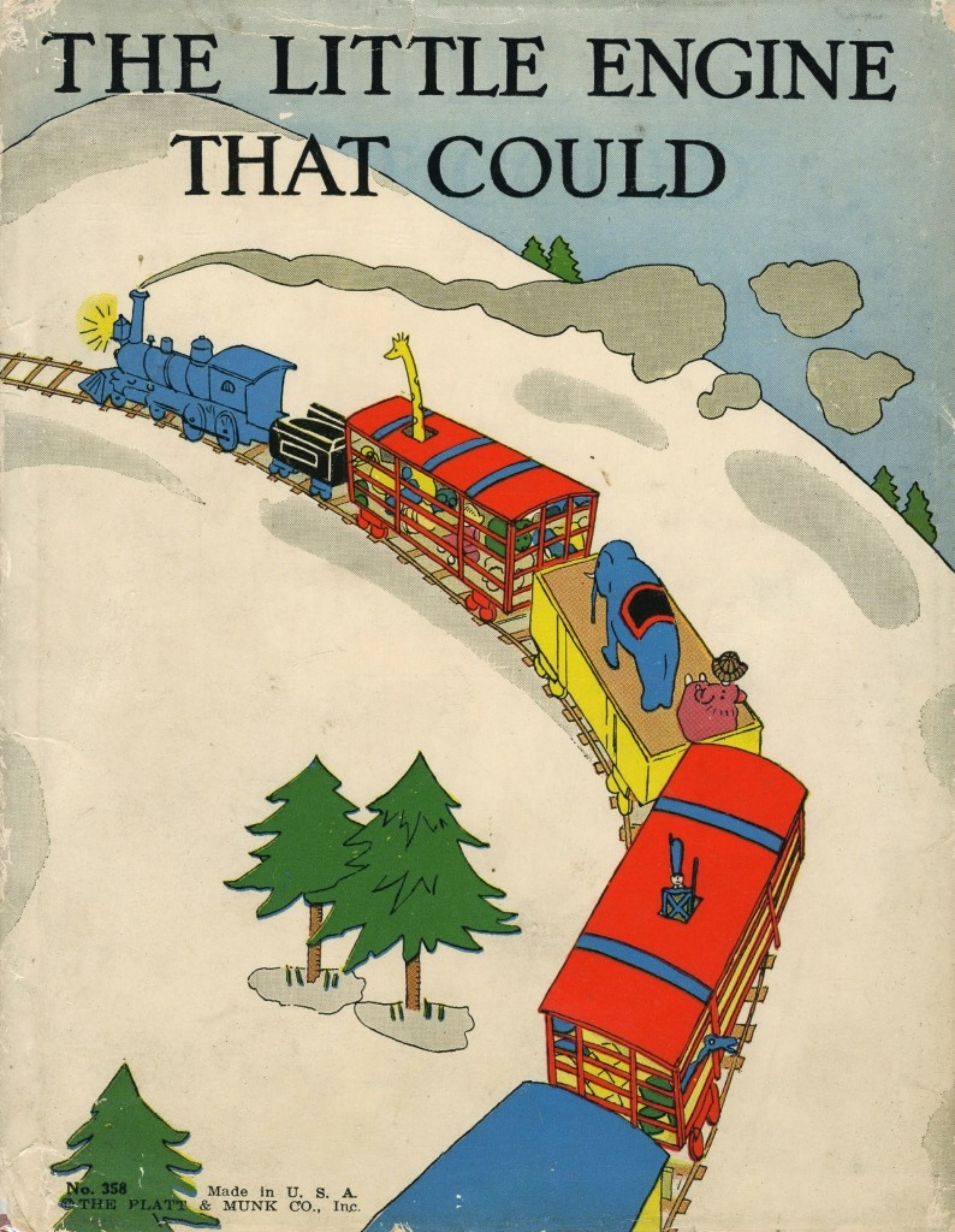
NARRATOR: And as the Little Blue Engine and the Little Train finally pulled into the station, you could hear the Little Blue Engine saying...

LITTLE BLUE ENGINE: I thought I could. I thought I could. Yes, I thought I could — and I did! I did!

NARRATOR: So the next time you are stuck and your wheels will not turn, just remember the Little Train and the Little Engine That Could... and see what YOU can do too!



THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT COULD



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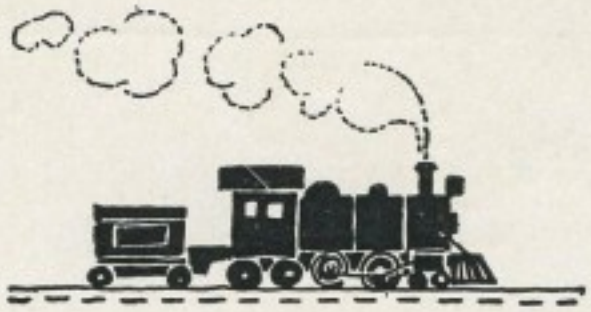
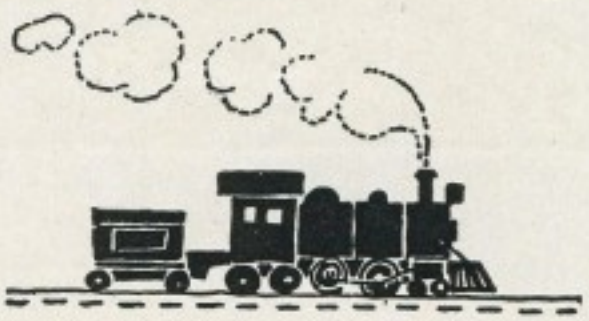
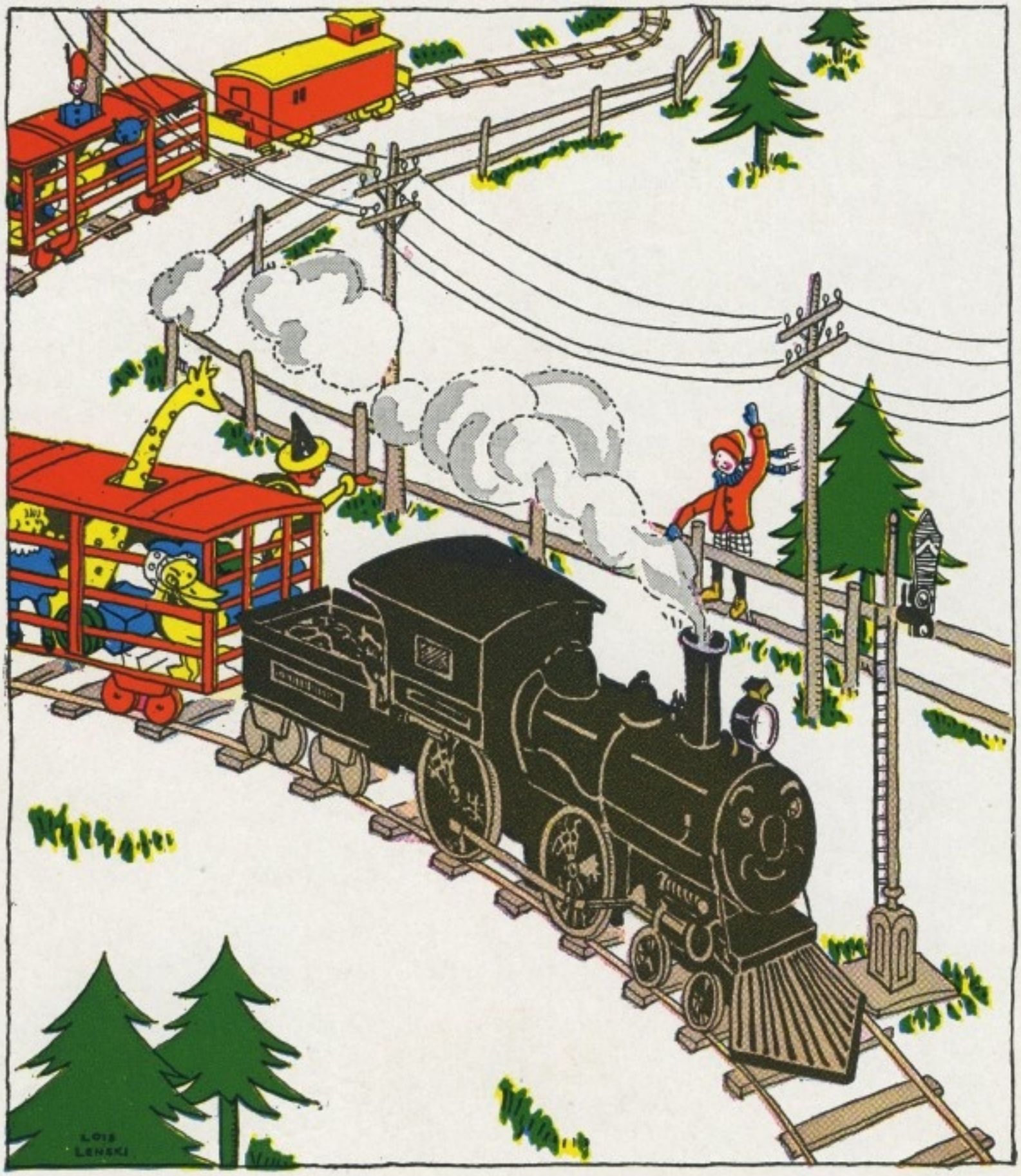


THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT COULD





SHE WAS A HAPPY LITTLE TRAIN

THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT COULD

RETOLD BY

WATTY PIPER

FROM

THE PONY ENGINE

By Mabel C. Bragg

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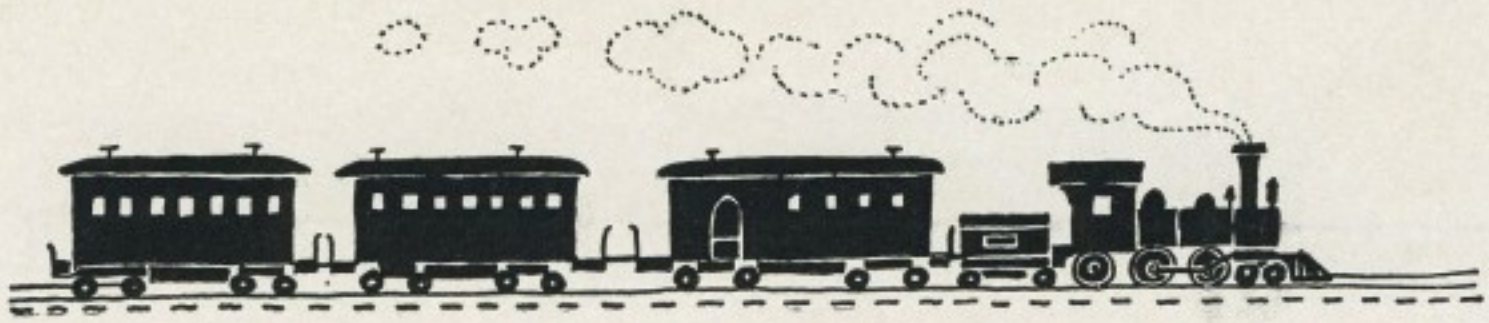


THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT COULD

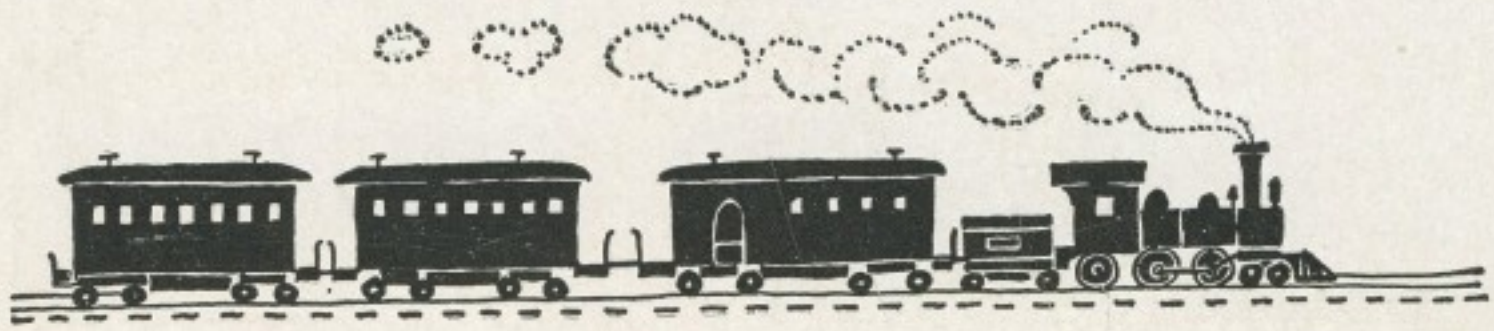
Chug, chug, chug. Puff, puff, puff. Ding-dong, ding-dong. The little train rumbled over the tracks. She was a happy little train for she had such a jolly load to carry. Her cars were filled full of good things for boys and girls.

There were toy animals—giraffes with long necks, Teddy bears with almost no necks at all, and even a baby elephant. Then there were dolls—dolls with blue eyes and yellow curls, dolls with brown eyes and brown bobbed heads, and the

gayest little toy clown you ever saw. And there were cars full of toy engines, aeroplanes, tops, jack-knives, picture puzzles, books, and every kind of thing boys or girls could want.

But that was not all. Some of the cars were filled with all sorts of good things for boys and girls to eat—big golden oranges, red-cheeked apples, bottles of creamy milk for their breakfasts, fresh spinach for their dinners, peppermint drops, and lollypops for after-meal treats.

The little train was carrying all these good things to the good little boys and



girls on the other side of the mountain. She puffed along happily. Then all of a sudden she stopped with a jerk. She simply

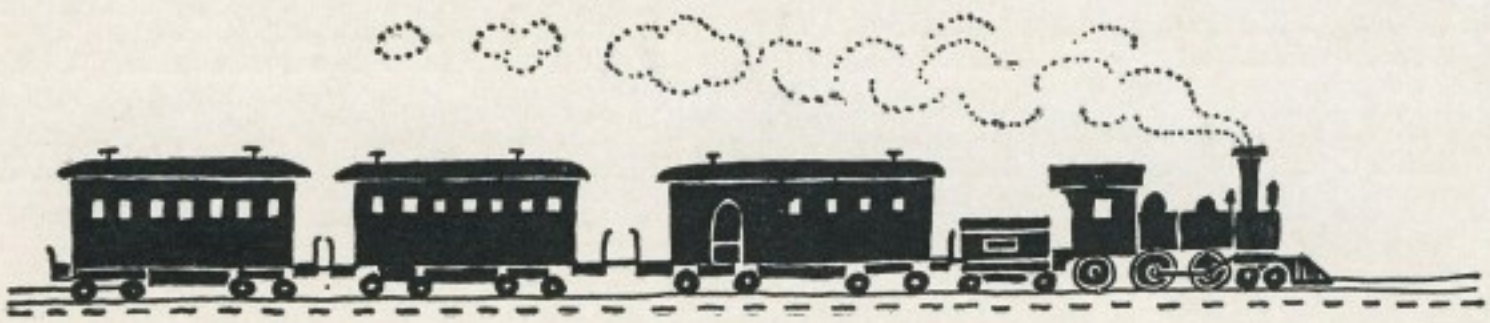
could not go another inch. She tried and she tried, but her wheels would not turn.

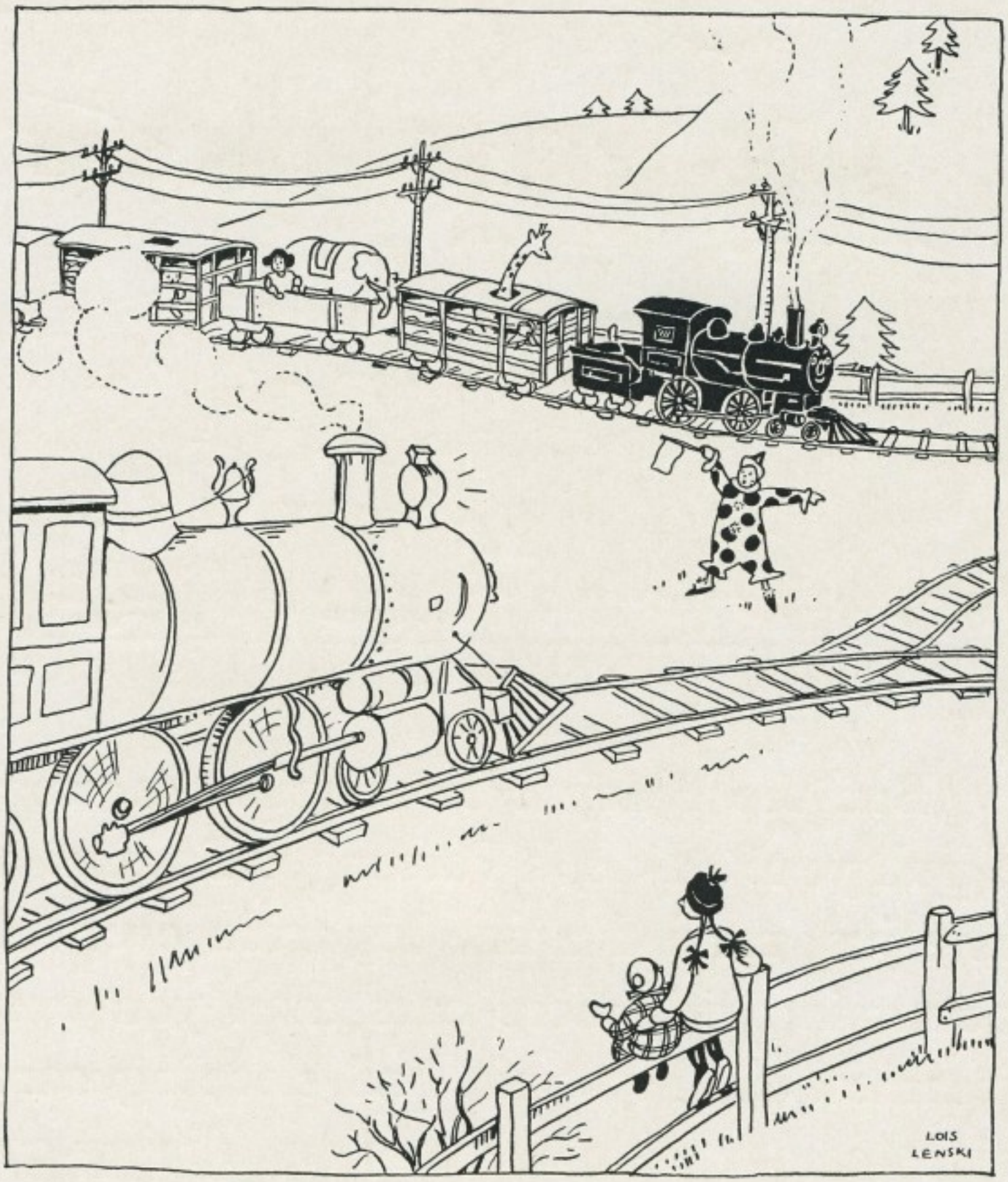
What were all those good little boys and girls on the other side of the mountain going to do without the jolly toys to play with and the wholesome food to eat?

"Here comes a shiny new engine," said the little clown who had jumped out of the train. "Let us ask him to help us."

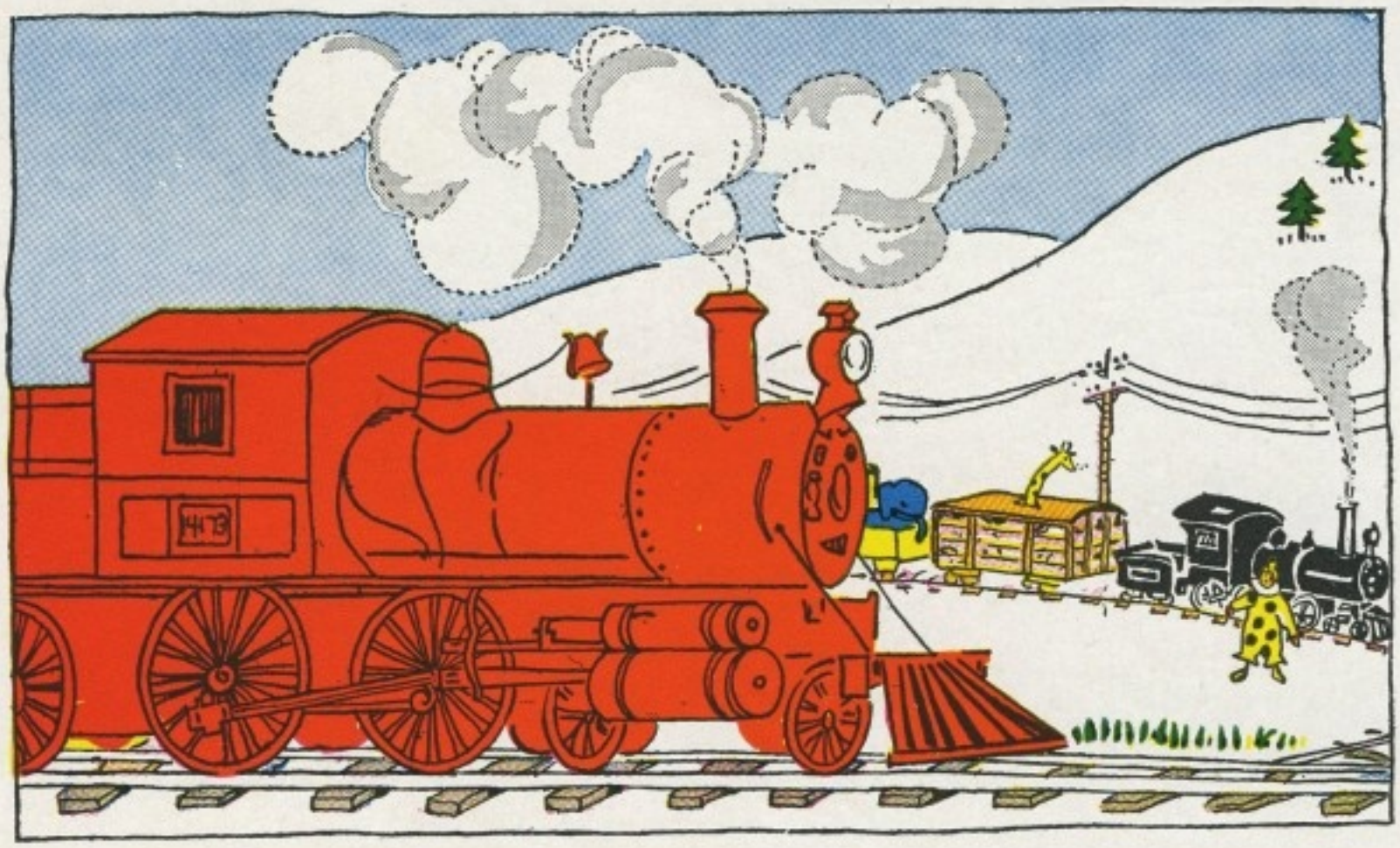
So all the dolls and toys cried out together:

"Please, Shiny New Engine, do carry our train over the mountain. Our engine

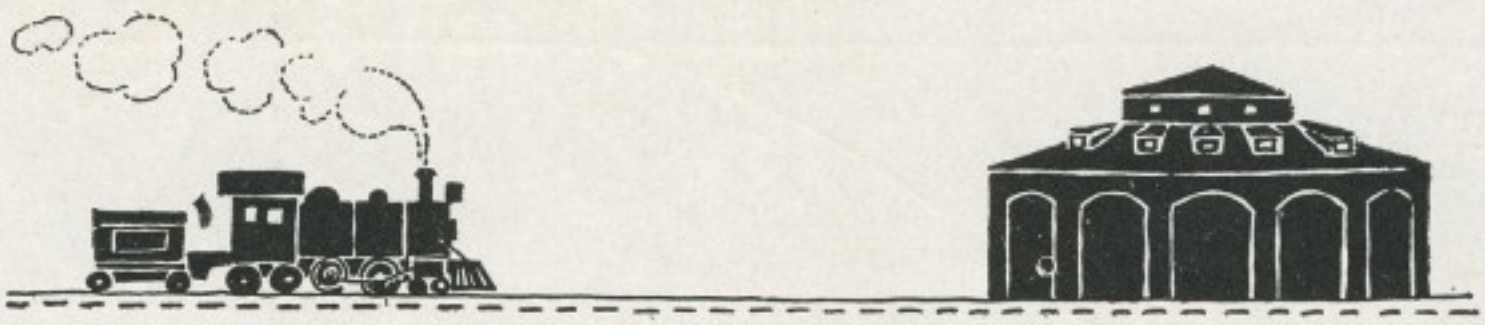




has broken down, and the boys and girls on the other side will have no toys to play with and no wholesome food to eat unless you help us."



But the Shiny New Engine snorted: "I pull you? I am a Passenger Engine. I have just carried a fine big train over the mountain, with more cars than you ever dreamed of. My train had sleeping cars, with comfortable berths; a dining-car where waiters bring whatever hungry people want to eat; and parlor cars in which people sit in soft arm-chairs and look out of big plate-glass windows. I carry the likes of you? Indeed not!" And off he



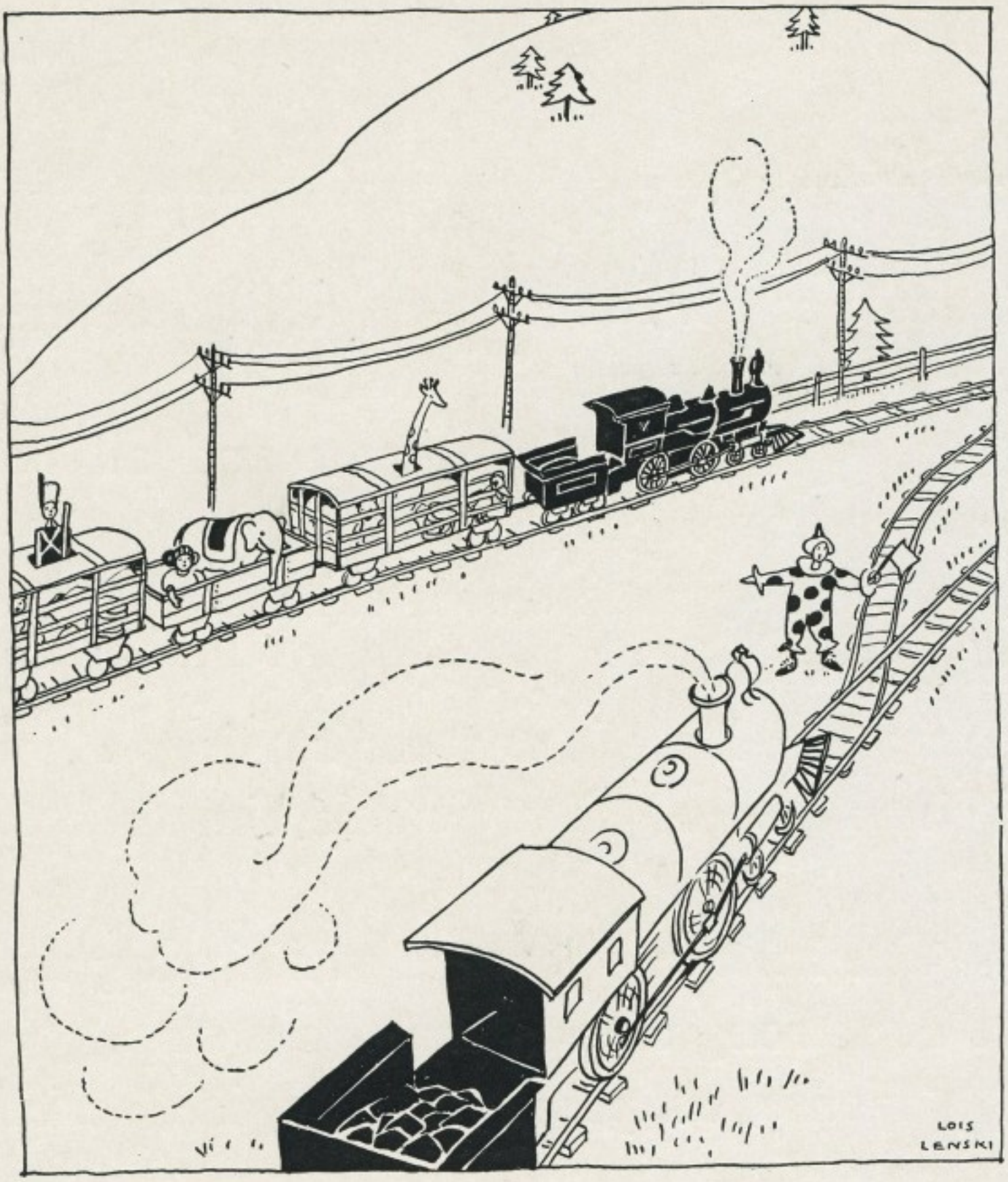
steamed to the roundhouse, where engines live when they are not busy.

How sad the little train and all the dolls and toys felt!

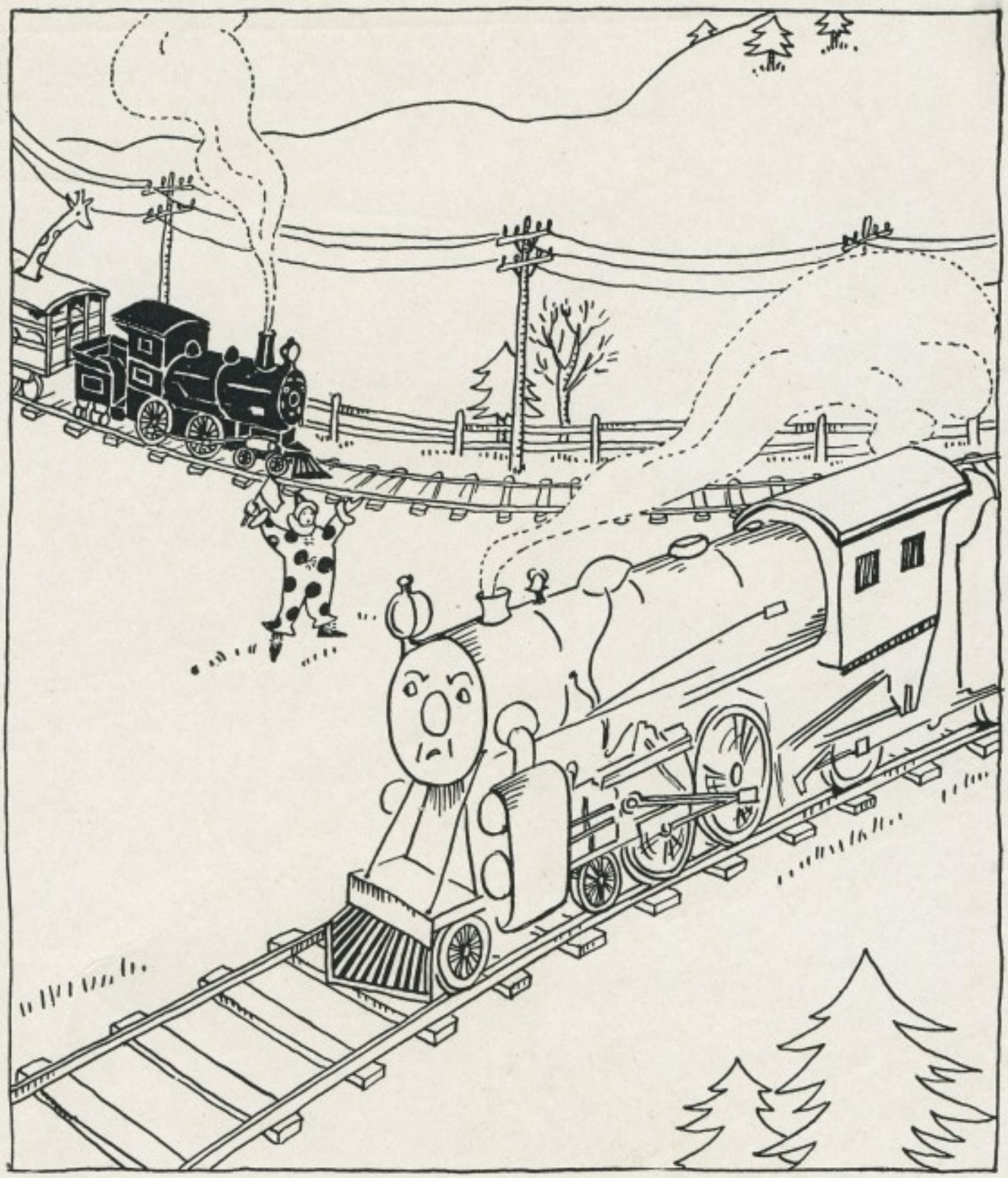
Then the little clown called out, "The Passenger Engine is not the only one in the world. Here is another coming, a fine big strong one. Let us ask him to help us."

The little toy clown waved his flag and the big strong engine came to a stop.

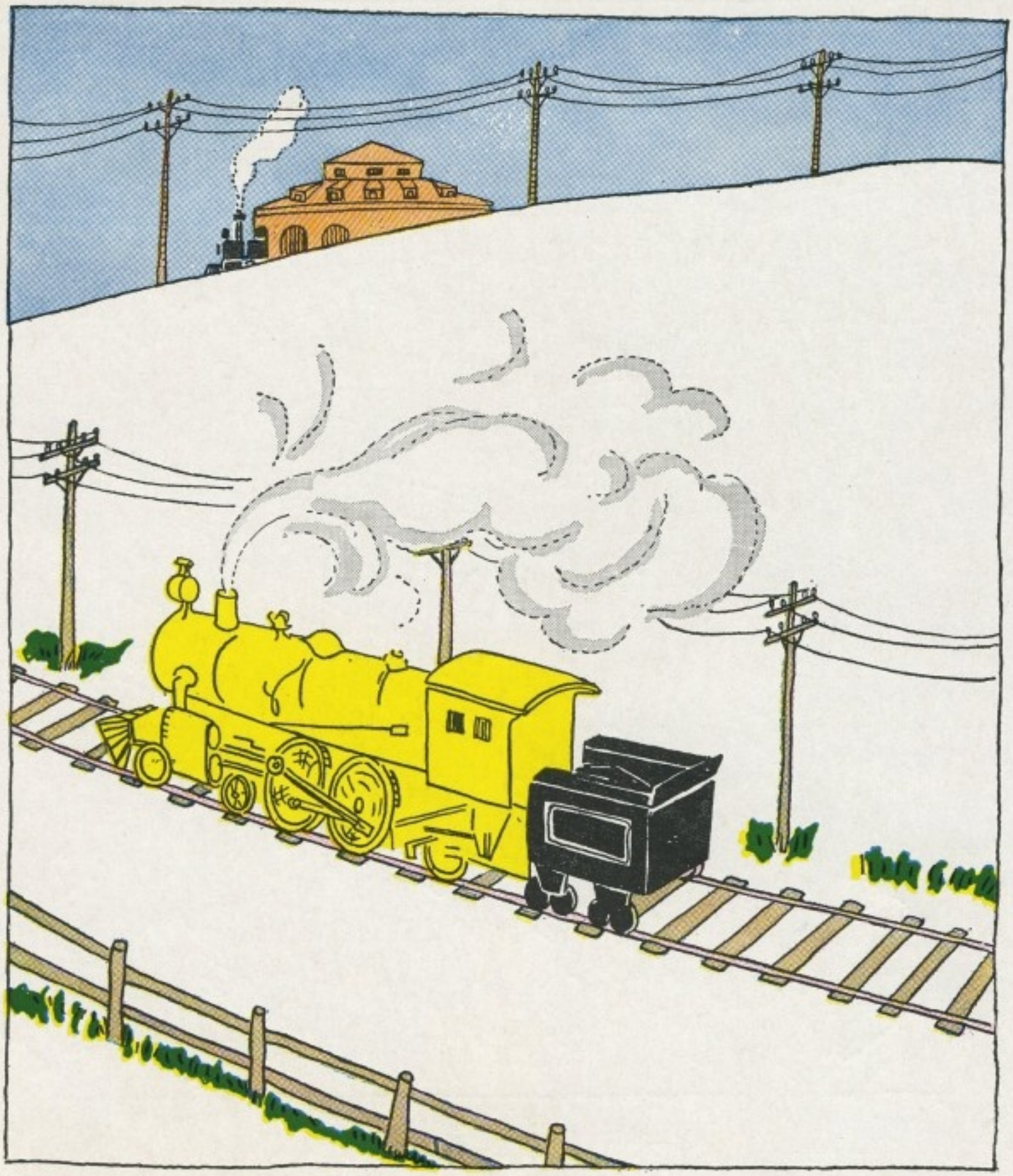
"Please, oh, please, Big Engine," cried all the dolls and toys together. "Do pull our train over the mountain. Our engine



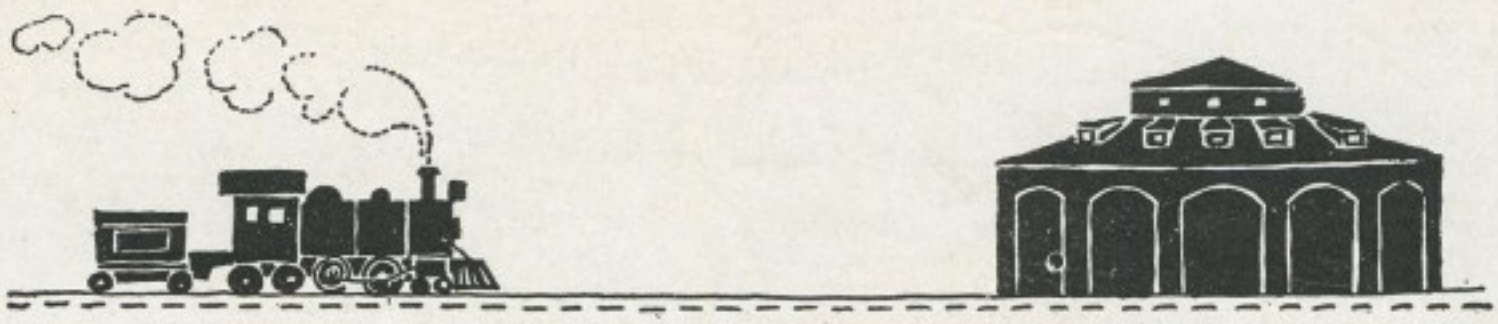
has broken down, and the good little boys and girls on the other side will have no toys to play with and no wholesome food to eat unless you help us."



But the Big Strong Engine bellowed: "I am a Freight Engine. I have just pulled a big train loaded with costly machines over the mountain. These machines print



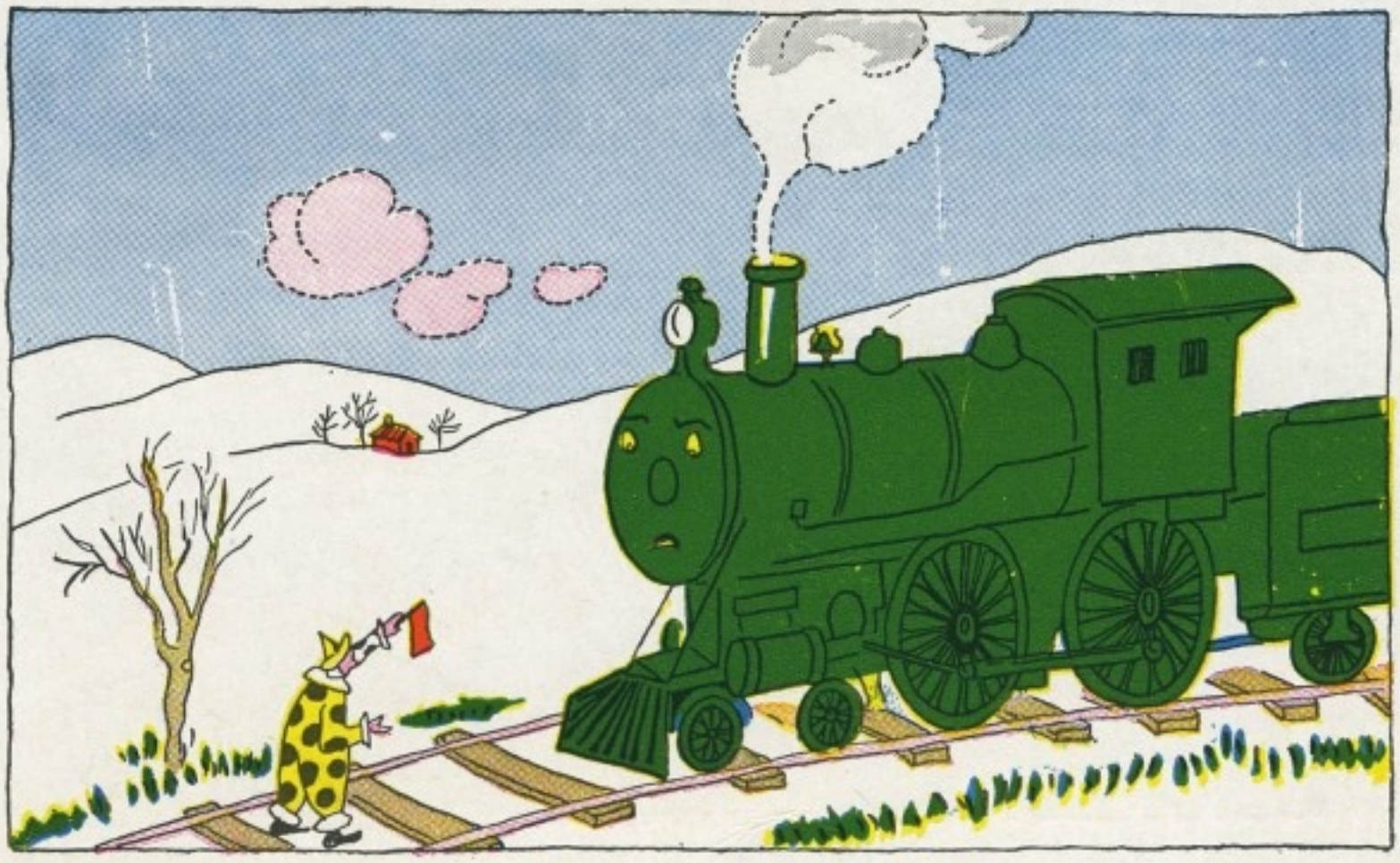
books and newspapers for grown-ups to read. I am a very important engine indeed. I won't carry the likes of you!" And



the Freight Engine puffed off indignantly to the round-house.

The little train and all the dolls and toys were very sad.

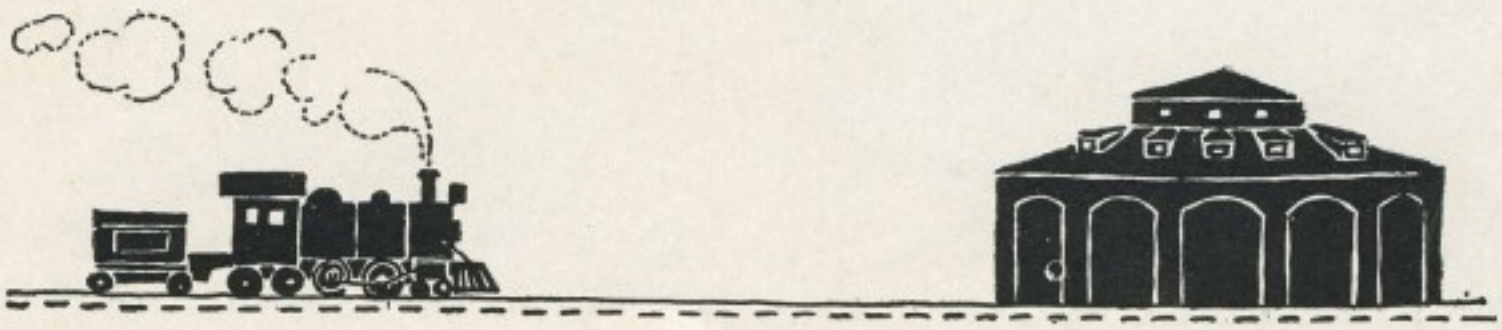
"Cheer up," cried the little toy clown. "The Freight Engine is not the only one in the world. Here comes another. He looks very old and tired, but our train is so little, perhaps he can help us."

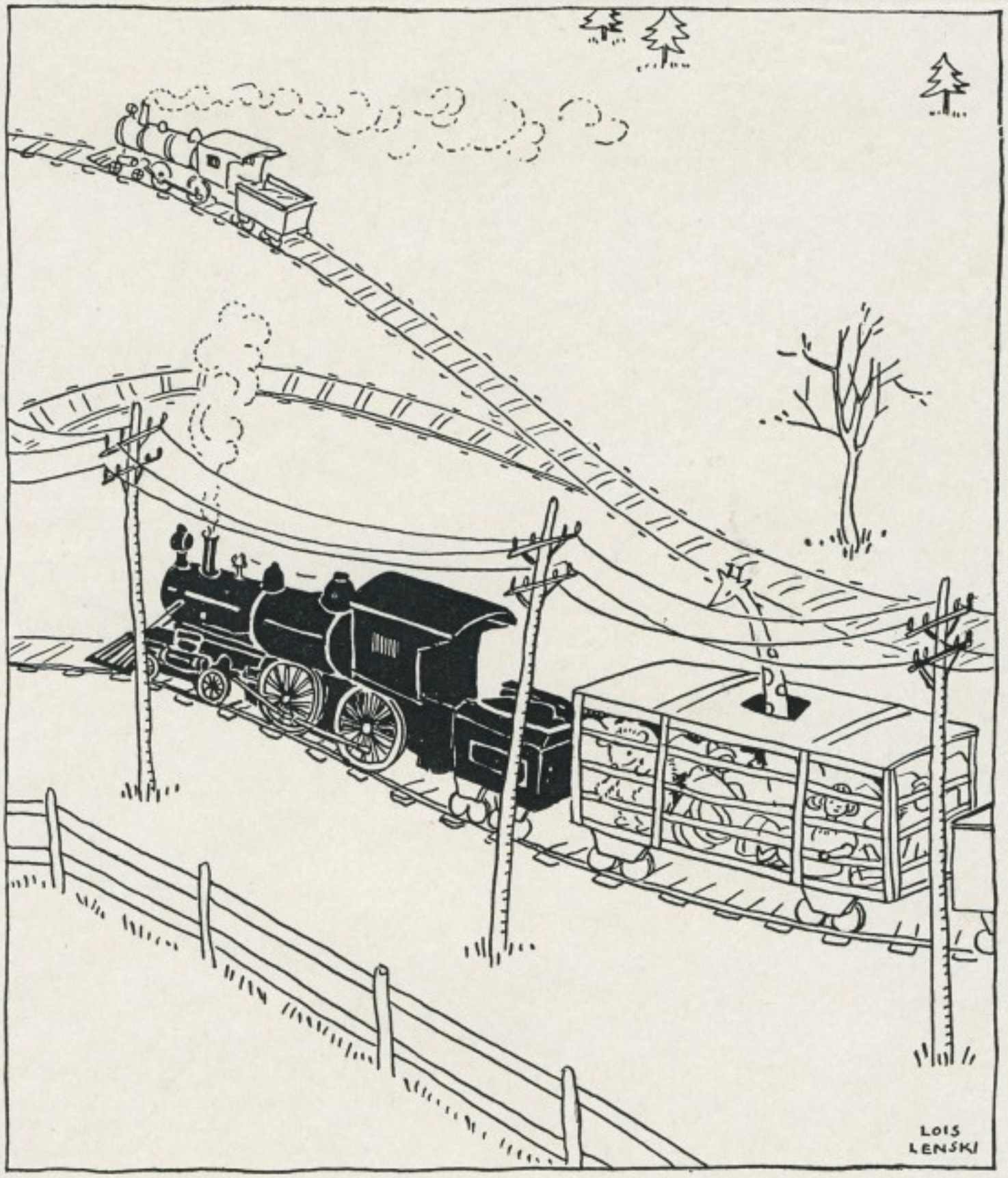


So the little toy clown waved his flag and the dingy, rusty old engine stopped.

"Please, Kind Engine," cried all the dolls and toys together. "Do pull our train over the mountain. Our engine has broken down, and the boys and girls on the other side will have no toys to play with and no wholesome food to eat unless you help us."

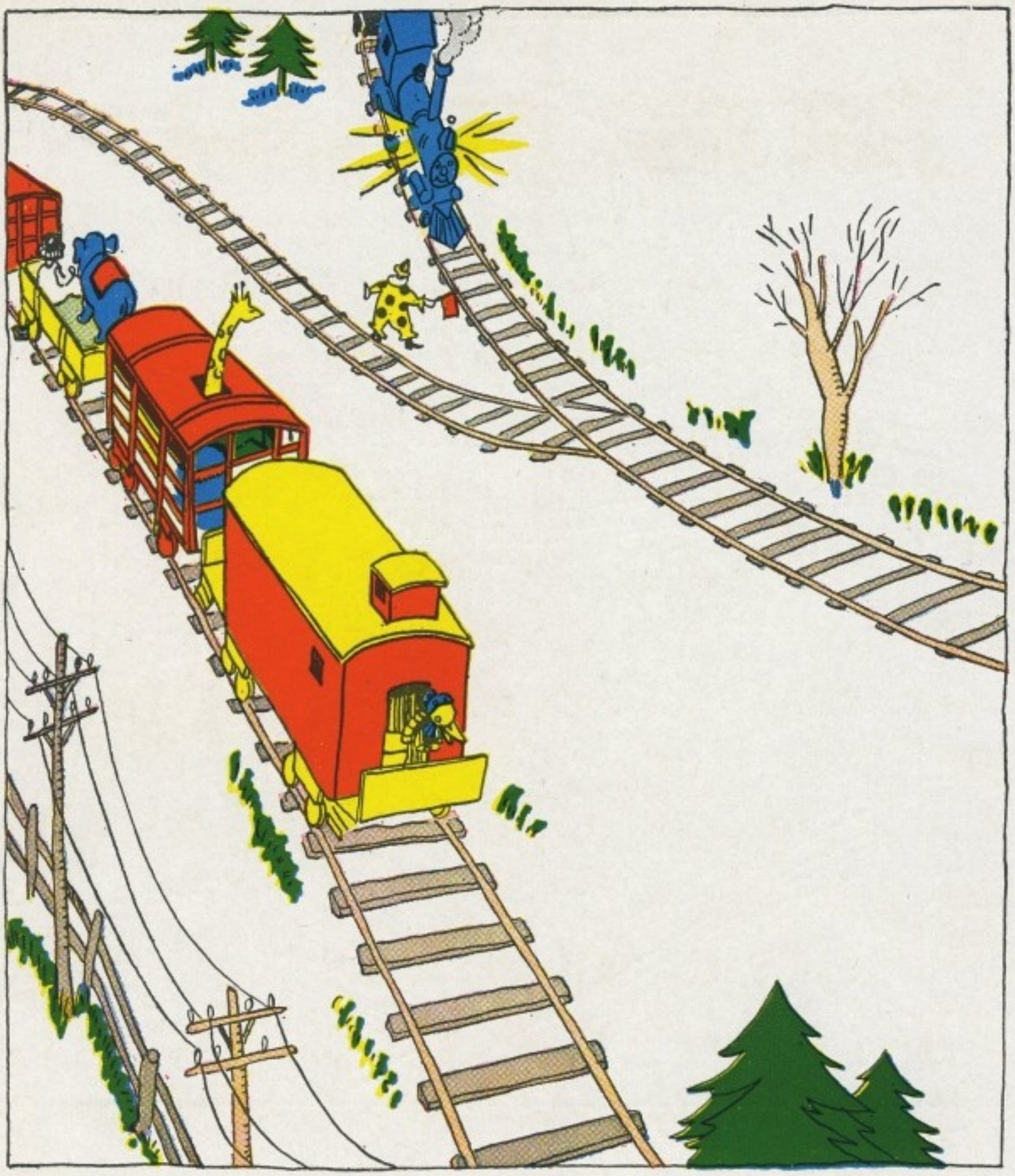
But the rusty old engine sighed: "I am so tired. I must rest my weary wheels. I cannot pull even so little a train as yours over the mountain. I can not. I can not. I can not."





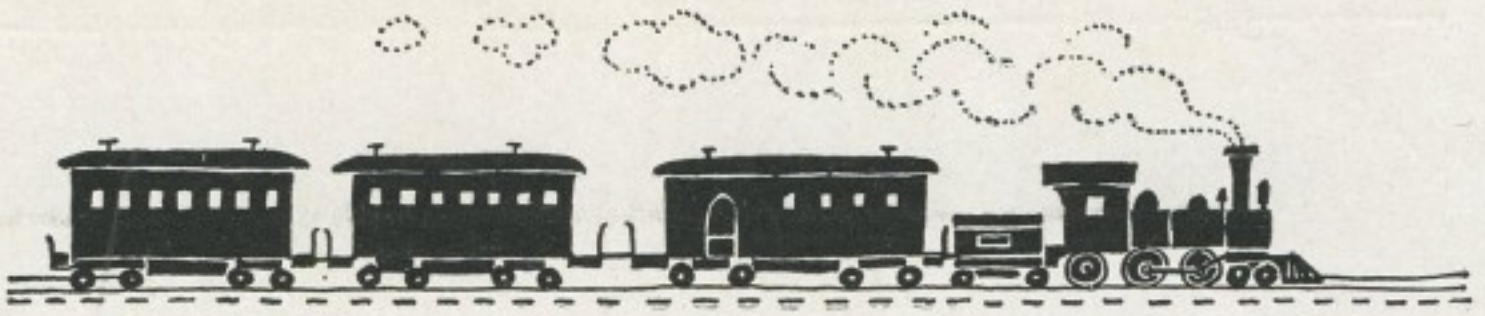
And off he rumbled to the round-house chugging, "I can not. I can not. I can not."

Then indeed the little train was very,



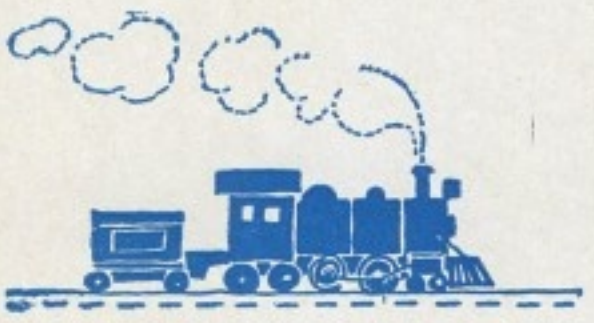
very sad, and the dolls and toys were ready to cry.

But the little clown called out, "Here



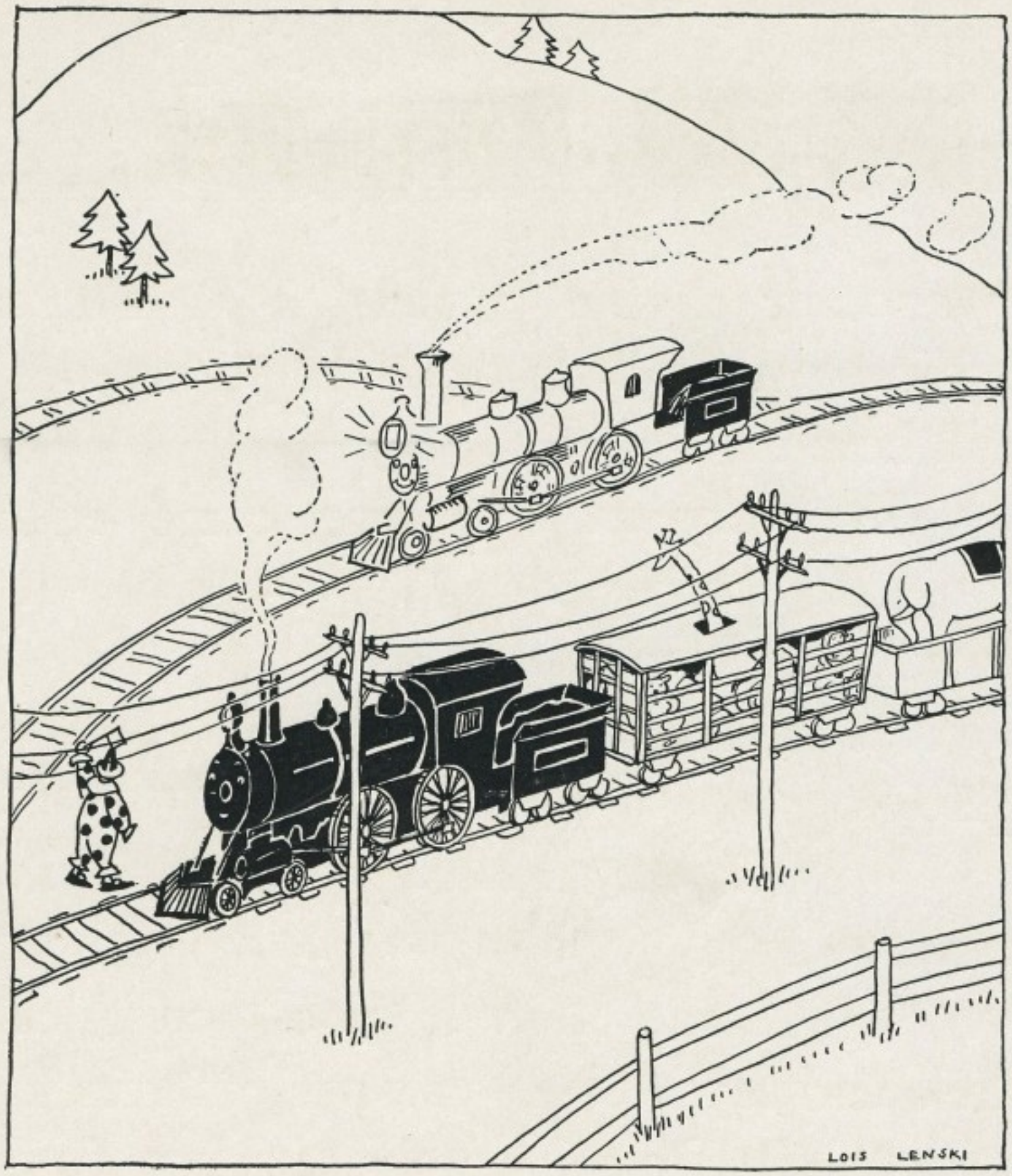
is another engine coming, a little blue engine, a very little one, but perhaps she will help us."

The very little engine came chug, chugging merrily along. When she saw the toy clown's flag, she stopped quickly.



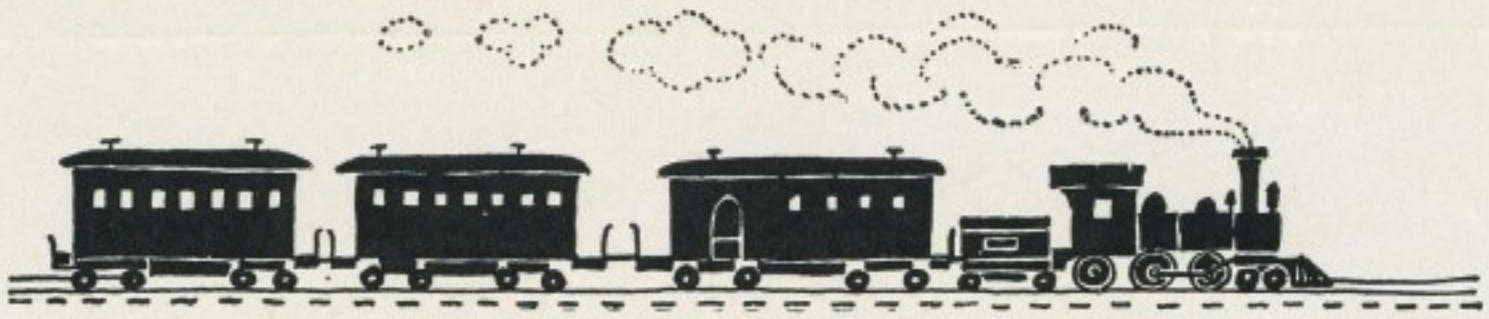
"What is the matter, my friends?" she asked kindly.

"Oh, Little Blue Engine," cried the dolls and toys. "Will you pull us over the mountain? Our engine has broken down and the good boys and girls on the other



side will have no toys to play with and no wholesome food to eat, unless you help us. Please, please, help us, Little Blue Engine."

"I'm not very big," said the Little Blue

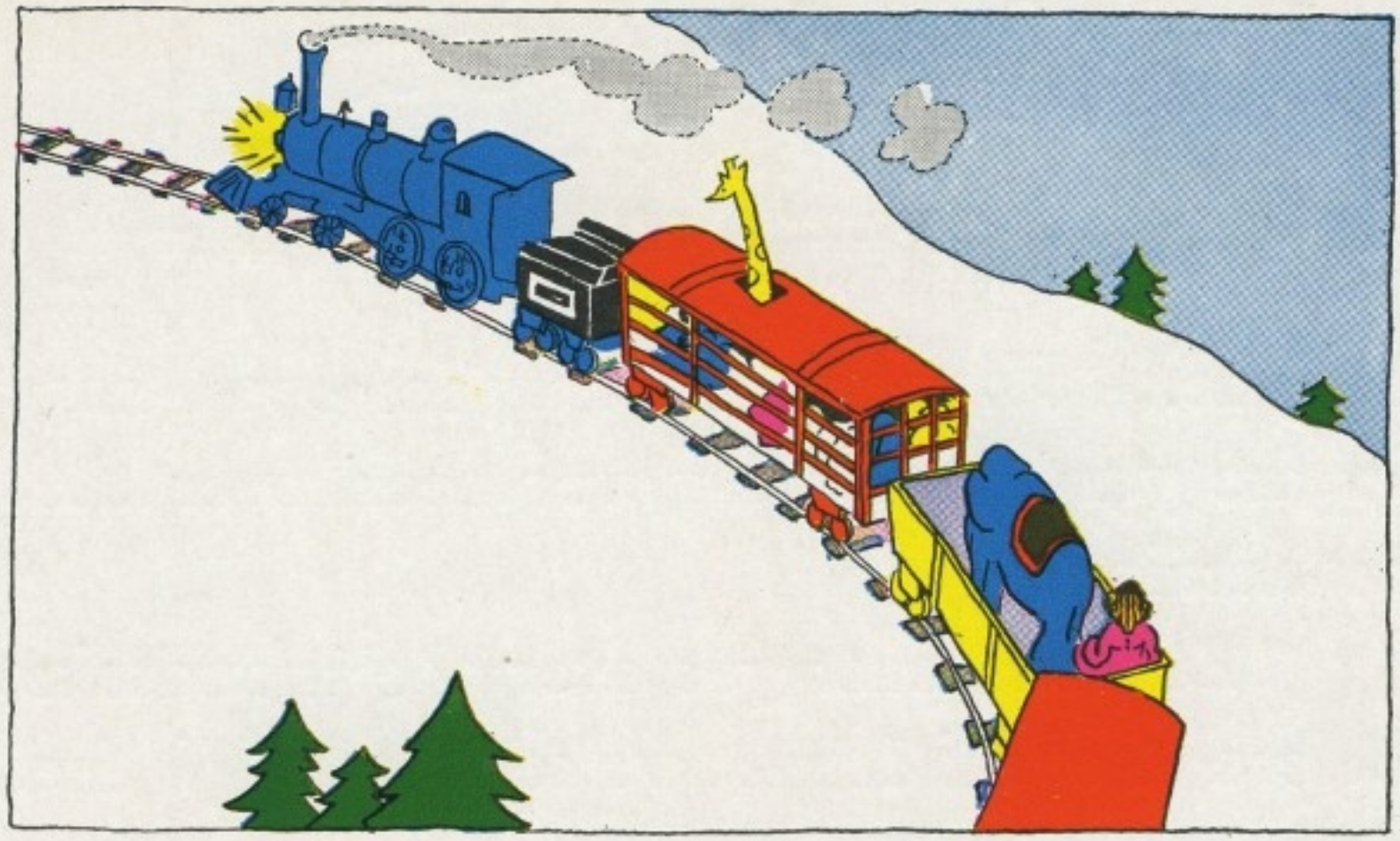


Engine. "They use me only for switching in the yard. I have never been over the mountain."

"But we must get over the mountain before the children awake," said all the dolls and the toys.

The very little engine looked up and saw the tears in the doll's eyes. And she thought of the good little boys and girls on the other side of the mountain who would have no toys and no wholesome food unless she helped.

Then she said, "I think I can. I think I can. I think I can." And she hitched

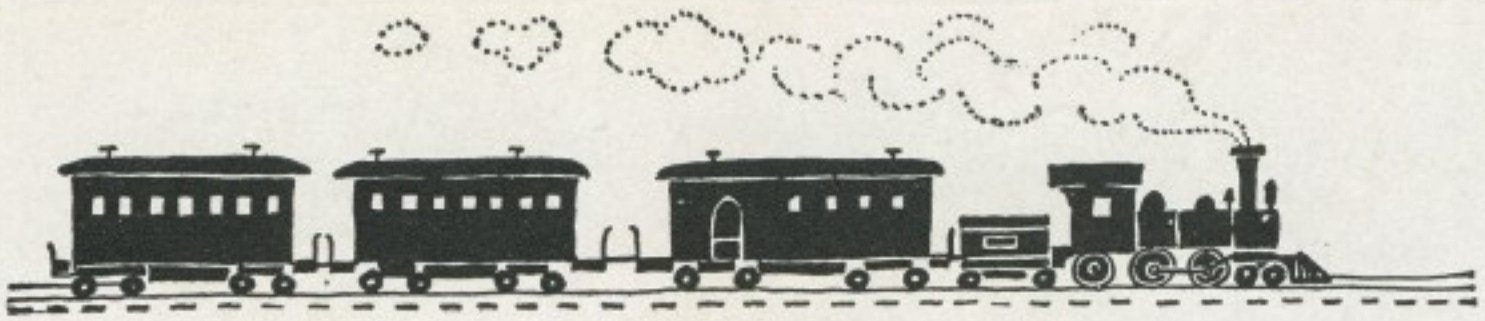


herself to the little train.

She tugged and pulled and pulled and tugged and slowly, slowly, slowly they started off.

The toy clown jumped aboard and all the dolls and the toy animals began to smile and cheer.

Puff, puff, chug, chug, went the little blue engine. "I think I can—I think I can

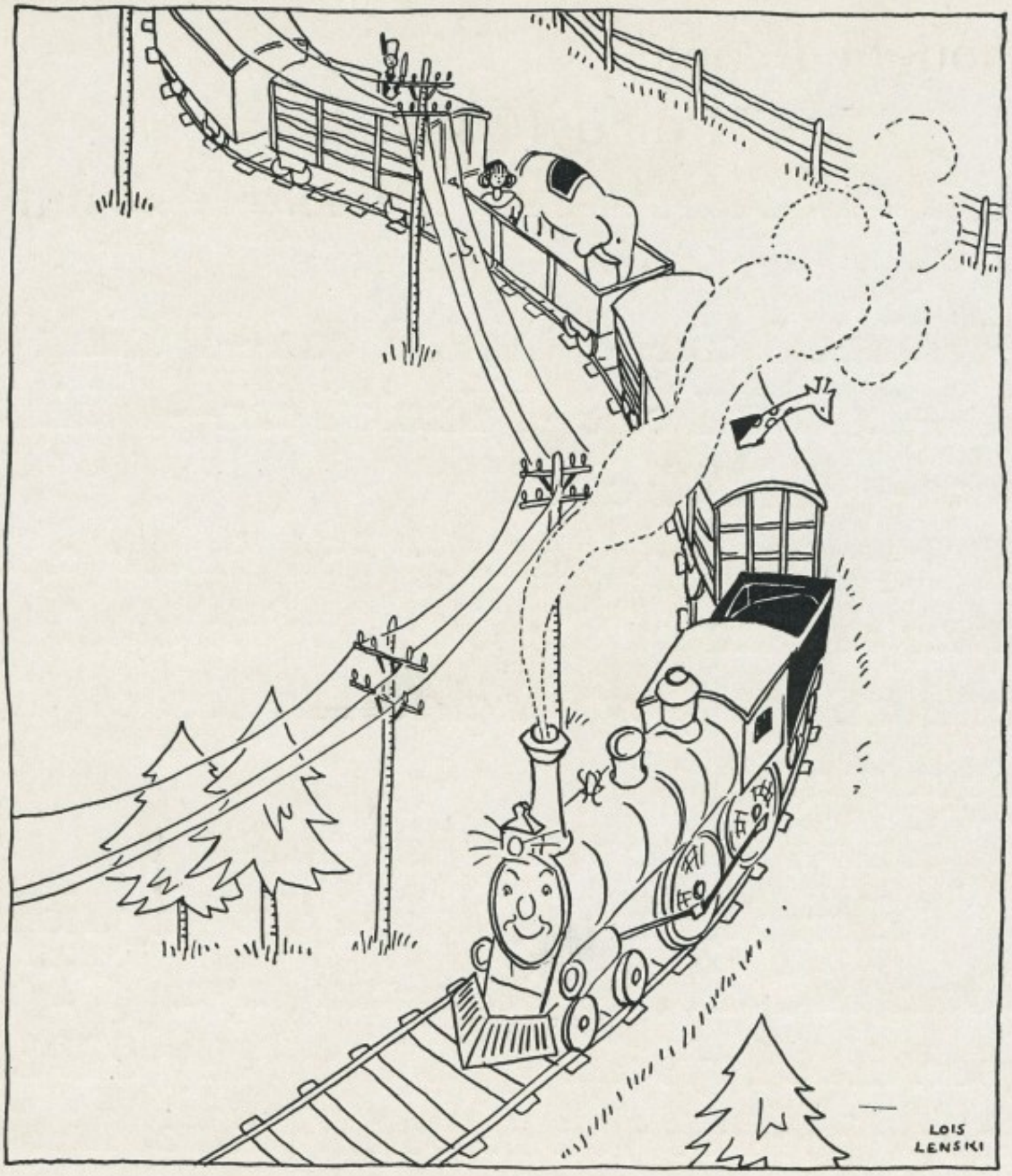


—I think I can—I think I can—I think I can—I think I can—I think I can—I think I can—I think I can—I think I can.”

Up, up, up. Faster and faster and faster and faster the little engine climbed until at last they reached the top of the mountain.

Down in the valley lay the city.

“Hurrah, hurrah,” cried the gay little clown and all the dolls and toys. “The good little boys and girls in the city will be happy because you helped us, kind, Little Blue Engine.”

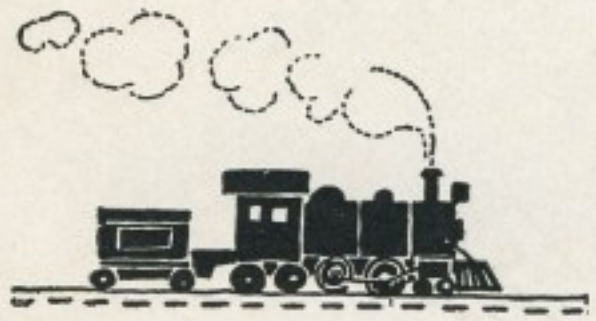


And the Little Blue Engine smiled and seemed to say as she puffed steadily down the mountain. "I thought I could. I thought I could. I thought I could. I

thought I could.

I thought I could.

I thought I could."



SPOKEN READING

Reading as a Spoken Experience in the Brain and Language Classroom

MAIN & MORE
How we learn to read and the power of reading aloud in school and at home

THINK TANK
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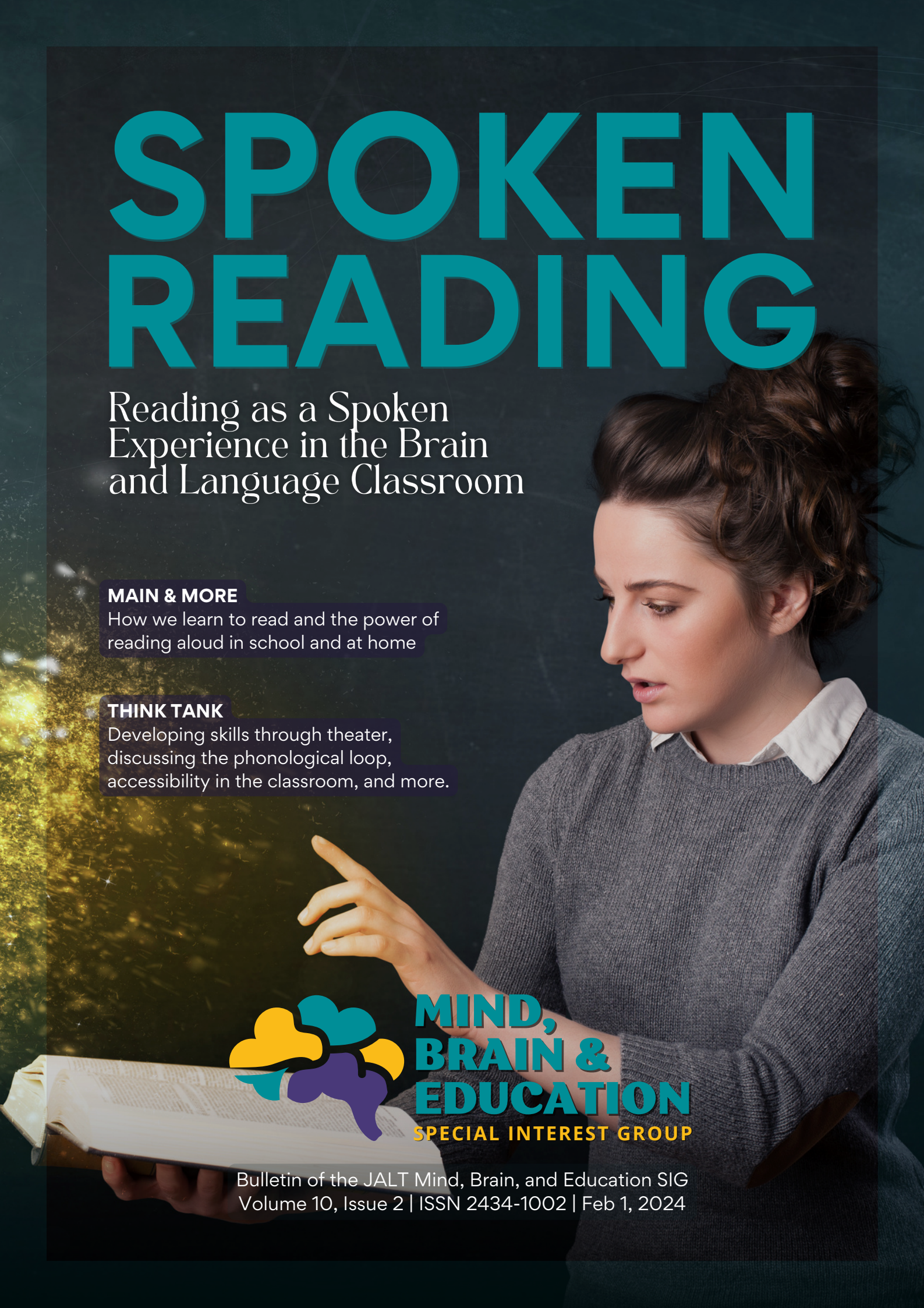

MIND, BRAIN & EDUCATION
SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP

Bulletin of the JALT Mind, Brain, and Education SIG
Volume 10, Issue 2 | ISSN 2434-1002 | Feb 1, 2024

Open the Language Classroom Curtains to Readers Theater

Written by
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Have you always had this desire to do theater in your classroom but felt daunted by all the labor that would involve? Worry no more. There is an easy way you can en- joy doing theater without the overhead: readers theater! So, let's start with a definition of readers theater, and what makes it different from conventional theater. In conventional theater, the goal is to create an illusion of reality on the stage: the audience watches as the action unfolds, while the actors are in a simulated world of their own, separated from the audience by an invisible wall. In readers theater, by contrast, the performers speak directly to the audience, acting with their voices to bring the scenes to life in the audience's imagination. Readers theater is thus a theater of *words*, which makes it perfectly suited to the language classroom. If performers use their bodies in readers theater—for example, to mime handing something to another performer—they do so facing the audience: one performer extends their hand, miming the act of giving something, and the other performer reaches out a hand and then pulls it back, miming the act of taking, all while facing the audience. There is no invisible wall, as in conventional theater; in readers theater, the performers are connected to the audience in a shared experience of reading aloud and actively listening.

As a theater of words, readers theater has much in common with old-fashioned radio drama, which thrived in the 1930s and 1940s before the advent of television. You can also find some audiobooks that feature a full cast of readers, with the multiplicity of voices creating an effect very similar to that of readers theater. Unlike radio drama and audiobooks, however, readers theater is performed for a live audience, which means that the audience becomes part of the event by listening and even engaging in the performance through call-and-response, singing along if there are songs in the story, etc.

Readers theater offers students an enjoyable interactive learning experience suitable for a range of ages and reading skills, from children to adults, and from beginning to advanced readers. There is a broad spectrum of performance in readers theater, ranging from informal to formal. At the informal end of the spectrum, readers theater can be a classroom (or Zoom) experience with or without advance preparation by the students. At the formal end of the spectrum, readers theater can be a fully elaborated stage performance, although with much less production overhead than traditional theater. In this article, we will focus on readers theater for the language classroom.

Getting Started: Readers Theater Scripts

The most common type of readers theater is dramatic, as in conventional theater, but with one major difference: a readers theater script usually has one or more narrators who describe the action that is taking place, along with descriptions of the characters and setting as needed. In conventional theater, the audience watches characters carrying out actions with props

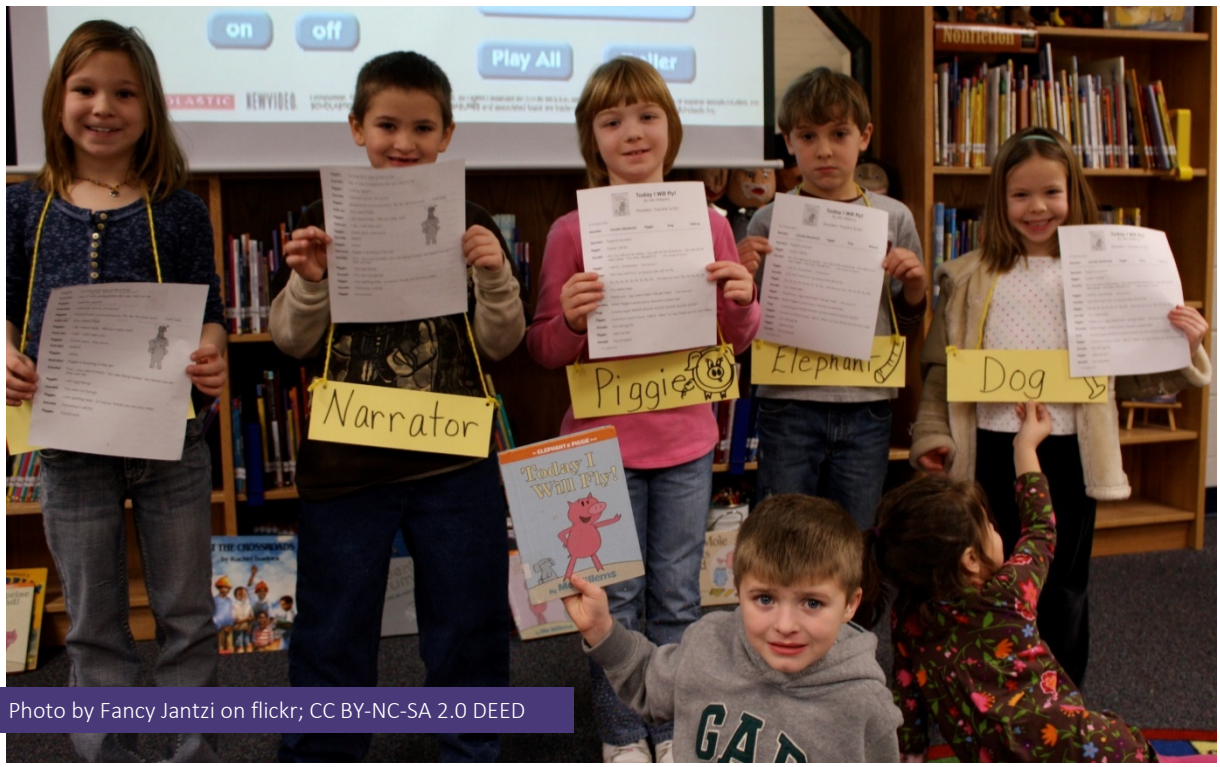


Photo by Fancy Jantzi on flickr; CC BY-NC-SA 2.0 DEED

against a backdrop of scenery, but in readers theater, the audience imagines the setting and action based on what the narrator(s) tell them. Here's an example from the beginning of *Rabbit and Bobcat*, a Native American tale Laura adapted for readers theater:

NARRATOR: Rabbit was running for his life, with Bobcat close behind.

RABBIT: (panting) I've got to get away!

BOBCAT: I've almost got you, Rabbit! Almost! Almost!

RABBIT: (panting harder) Got to... got to find a place to hide!

NARRATOR: Then, to Rabbit's delight, he saw a hollow tree ahead, and jumped right inside. The hole was big enough for Rabbit to squeeze through, but not Bobcat. So Bobcat skidded to a stop in front of the tree, growling and snarling.

There are three basic ways you can obtain a usable readers theater script: you can 1) modify plays originally written for conventional theater, 2) use and/or adapt scripts written for readers theater, or 3) write your own scripts. Concerning topics and language level, it's a good idea to choose topics according to your learners' interests and make sure that the language level of the script is a little more advanced than the students' current reading level (link).

Adapting conventional scripts. To adapt a conventional script for readers theater, add the narrator(s) and remove the stage directions. This allows students to perform the play with a focus on the reading, dispensing with the complexities of conventional theater performance (memorizing lines, staging, costumes, make-up, etc.). When the narrator has a lot to say, you can break up the narrator's role into multiple parts, thus involving more students in the performance. You can also develop the narrator in creative ways, such as having the narrator engage in dialogue with the characters and/or engaging in question-and-answer with the audience, etc.

Scripts written for readers theater. There are many books of readers theater scripts for students of all ages; see the resources below for suggestions. Laura also has a growing collection of Creative-Commons-licensed readers theater scripts inspired by world folktales which are available at Scripts.LauraGibbs.net. There are currently 31 scripts available, many with audio recordings to help students with pronunciation. The Creative Commons license allows teachers and students to adapt the plays in whatever way they want, making the plays longer or shorter, for example, and adjusting the language to match the students' reading level(s), etc.

Writing your own scripts. For even more fun, you can create your own readers theater scripts, tailoring the scripts to the language level(s) of your students, as well as their interests and passions. You can also draft scripts in collaboration with your students: If you write out the narrator parts of the script covering the characters and action, your students can write the dialogue, bringing the play to life in their own words. There's no need to start writing a story from scratch, as there are literally thousands of books of myths, legends, fairy tales, and folktales in the public domain, stories that are just waiting to be retold in new ways. (You can find out more about that at Duke University's Center for the Study of the Public Domain.)

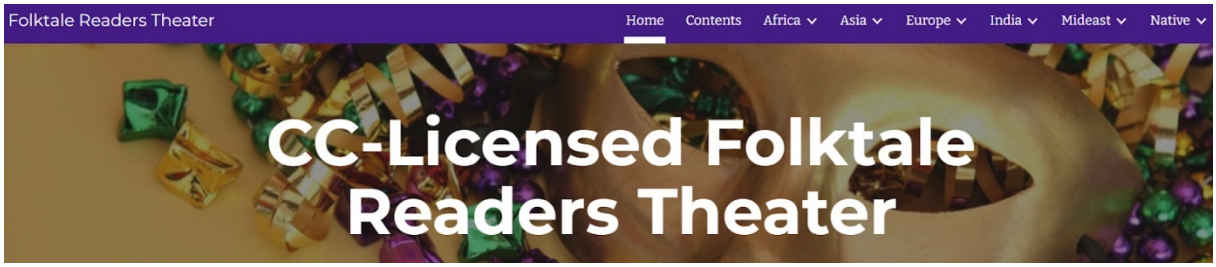
Poetic and expository scripts. Readers theater can also be used to perform poetry and expository texts such as essays, historical documents, diaries, journalistic writing, etc. Instead of a narrator and dramatic characters, these readers theater scripts are built around the interplay of different voices, a "symphony of voices" with different portions of the text spoken by different performers. Here's a lovely example of a group of children interpreting Shel Silverstein's poem *Sick*: the text itself and the readers theater performance.

Having the students themselves divide up a poem or an essay into different voices is both an analytical and creative practice, bringing the meaning of the text to life by designating the portions for each voice.

Interpretation, Practice, and Performance

Once the script is ready for your students, you can think about activities that will motivate them to engage with the text and with the collaborative readers theater experience. Activities might focus on the theme(s) in the script, reading comprehension, and/or target vocabulary.

Oral interpretation. Developing readers need time to familiarize themselves with the whole script and to interpret their individual lines. In addition to making sure they feel confident about the meaning and pronunciation of each word, they also need to think about the prosody, i.e., the way that meaning is conveyed by stress and intonation.



Screenshot of Laura's CC-licensed folktale readers theater homepage

Just which word(s) are emphasized in a sentence depends on the dramatic context:

- ***Did*** you steal the giant's harp? (or not?)
- Did ***you*** steal the giant's harp? (you, of all people!)
- Did you ***steal*** the giant's harp? (i.e., you didn't buy it, find it, etc.)
- Did you steal ***the*** giant's harp? (we all know about that harp!)
- Did you steal the ***giant's*** harp? (as opposed to someone else's harp)
- Did you steal the giant's ***harp***? (you were supposed to steal his drum!)

As students interpret each line, they can mark up their copy of the script for performance. In readers theater, performers hold their script when performing, much as orchestra musicians have their sheet music with them on stage, and marking up the script is an important part of how readers prepare for their performance.

In addition to intonation, performers need to think about how softly or loudly they will be speaking each line, along with the speed at which they speak, whether they will speak boldly or hesitantly, etc. There are also the non-verbal parts of speaking: sighs, pauses, laughs, groans, and so on. Don't pass over the importance of these seemingly minor aspects of language. One of the deficits of the way we teach language is that we remove it from show of emotion and nonverbal communication, often creating verbal robots instead of real-world communicators. You can encourage students to turn their critical attention to the TV shows and movies that they watch so they can start to consciously pay attention to those oral performances and learn from them.

Practice and feedback. When working alone, students can record themselves reading their lines and then listen to the recording to reflect metacognitively on their current strengths and weaknesses, setting goals for aspects they want to improve. Students also need to practice together, learning to listen to the other readers carefully in order to weave their lines in at the right time. After practicing with others, students can give each other feedback, orally and/or in writing, and they can also continue to reflect on their own performance. In addition, the teacher can also give feedback by listening to practice sessions in the classroom and/or by listening to recordings that the students provide.

Performance and assessment. After students have practiced their roles, they will be ready to perform. That might mean a formal performance in the classroom for their fellow students, or perhaps a performance for another teacher's class. Performances can be recorded as audio or video to share with a virtual audience, such as the students' families and friends. It is also possible to develop readers theater as an actual stage performance in the school theater or auditorium, and some speech and drama competitions also include readers theater (e.g., link).

Performances provide an opportunity to assess students' work and their progress. After considering which specific skills your students have been working on, you can create your own assessment rubric or adapt existing ones. Here are three examples found on the internet: holistic rubric, discrete skills rubric, simple discrete skills rubric (on slide 30). Tanner's *Readers Theatre Fundamentals* (see resources below) also contains rubrics for every aspect of the readers theater process from initial concept development through the formal stage production.

Closing the Curtains

NARRATOR: In Laura's study, Heather and Laura are hunched over Laura's computer, hard at work on this article. Yes, the one you are reading right now! Completely fed up, one of Laura's cats decides it's time to jump on the keyboard.

CAT: Meow! Finish writing your article and play with me!

HEATHER: (laughing) Any last thoughts for our readers?

LAURA: Readers theater is a fun, creative, and interactive way . . .

HEATHER: For students to work on reading fluency,

LAURA: Oral fluency,

HEATHER: Active listening,

LAURA: And even writing.

CAT: Purrrfect for language learners!

NARRATOR: Laura and Heather dash off the last few sentences of their article, shut down the computer, and give the cat some well-deserved attention. And this narrator thanks you, human readers, for taking the time to read our article. We hope it inspires you to try out readers theater with your students!

Laura Gibbs (Ph.D.) recently retired from 20+ years of teaching courses in mythology and folklore at the University of Oklahoma. She is the author of the Creative-Commons-licensed "Tiny Tales" folktale book series, along with folktale scripts for readers theater, which are available free online at *LauraGibbs.net*.

Heather Kretschmer has been teaching English for over 20 years, primarily in Germany. She earned degrees in German (BA & MA) and TESL (MA) from Bowling Green State University in Ohio. Currently, she has the privilege of working with Business English students at the Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, Germany.

Resources

Scripts and Staging:

Some prolific authors of readers theater scripts include:

Suzanne Barchers. Her books include *From Atalanta to Zeus: Readers Theatre from Greek Mythology*, *Multicultural Folktales: Readers Theatre*, *Scary Readers Theatre*, and more.

Anthony Fredericks. His books include *African Legends, Myths, and Folktales for Readers Theatre; American Folklore, Legends, and Tall Tales for Readers Theatre; Frantic Frogs and Other Frankly Fractured Folktales for Readers Theatre*, and more.

Aaron Shepard. See the scripts at his website, along with his books: *Folktales on Stage*, *Readers on Stage*, and *Stories on Stage*.

You can find detailed advice about the staging of readers theater in **Fran Averett Tanner**'s *Readers Theater Fundamentals* and in **Leslie Coger and Melvin White**'s *Readers Theatre Handbook*. Both of those books include abundant photographs of readers theater productions that can inspire your own productions. You can also see readers theater productions featuring performers of all ages on YouTube, for example, here.

Research and Practical Teaching Tips:

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Nfor, S. (2022). Implementing readers' theater for a project-based advanced English course. *Journal of Multilingual Pedagogy and Practice*, *2*, 160-170. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/371538816_Implementing_Readers'_Theater_for_a_Project-Based_Advanced_English_course

Tanner, M. W. & Chugg, A. (2018). Empowering adult ELL's fluency and pronunciation skills through readers theater. *Brigham Young University Faculty Publications*. 5956. https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/5956/

Taylor de Caballero, K. (2018). Introduction to Reader's Theater for EFL Classrooms. *English Language Teaching Methodology: Shaping the Way We Teach English Webinars*. [YouTube]. https://youtu.be/utWd8TF_kwQ?si=ymfJRmxWeJSo7SKA